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THE MYSTERY
OF
ASHLEIGH MANOR

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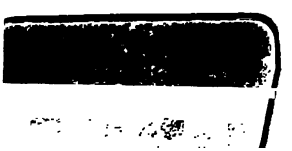

THE

MYSTERY OF ASHLEIGH MANOR.

A Romance.

BY

ELIZA RHYL DAVIES.

"Unnatural deeds
Do breed unnatural troubles; infected minds
To their deaf pillows will discharge their secrets."
MACBETH.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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THE

MYSTERY OF ASHLEIGH MANOR.

A Romance.

INTRODUCTORY CHAPTER.

THERE died some years ago, in the village of D——, in Kent, an aged woman, whose history had defied the inquisitiveness of two generations of gossips. Her name was Mrs. Dartrell. At the time of her death she could certainly not have been less than eighty years old; and it was computed by a reference to some of the graybeards of the place, that she had lived at D—— for upwards of fifty-nine years.

Who her husband had been; what her antecedents were; whether her real name was Dartrell or not; why she lived in such strict

privacy; were questions which had been often asked, but never answered. Nobody knew anything about her. Nobody visited her. Not that her face was unfamiliar. She was to be seen at church Sunday after Sunday, with one regular attendant; and though she remained at home during the week days, where, it was conjectured, she took the exercise that was needful to her health in her garden, yet the curious wayfarer by straining his eyes at the windows, might often discern her peering over the pots of flowers which made a perpetual summer of her little house.

Judging from the description I have received from persons who remember her, I should say that a more amiable face than Mrs. Dartrell's no old lady ever had. She preserved her eyesight unimpaired to the hour of her death, and was thus able to dispense with one forcible illustration of old age—I mean spectacles. Her hair was white as snow, soft as silk, and very plentiful considering her years. She had a finely-shaped nose, and her complexion was fair and delicate, with an agreeable bloom, which was harshly held to be artificial. She retained to the last in her attire the style and fashion of

the dresses which were in vogue when she was young. It was sometimes considered that the merriment excited by her queer coal-scuttle bonnet, her high-waisted, short-skirted robe, her frill and her feathers—dim perpetuations of the quaint costumes of the dandizettes of 1810—was the secret of her hiding herself in-doors. But this was a most insufficient conclusion. It lowered the character of the piquant mystery which hedged the old woman with an unenviable divinity, and was flatly rejected by most of the ladies of the place, who, on the whole, were rather disposed to consider her mad.

The theory of madness was indeed supported for no less than thirty years by the presence of the person who resided with her as keeper or companion. This person was known by the name of Mrs. Bland. Some supposed her to be a relative; others a servant; a good many, as I have said, a keeper. The mystery attached to her was hardly less provoking than that attached to Mrs. Dartrell. She was singularly reserved in speech. Every effort made to question her was cut short by an answer, not indeed uncivil, but decisive enough to intimate that any further interrogatories would be resented. She

glided on her various errands through the village with the silence and austerity of a ghost. Her words to the shopkeepers, or to those with whom she had business dealings, were few and much to the point. It was, however, easily gathered from her speech, that Mrs. Bland was not a lady. The few sober-minded people of D——, who declined to witness a mystery in everything connected with Mrs. Dartrell, conjectured that Mrs. Bland was Mrs. Dartrell's housekeeper; a servant whom long years of faithful service had brought into habits of familiar intimacy with her mistress. Those who watched them at church noticed the tender air of concern with which Mrs. Bland adjusted the cushion for Mrs. Dartrell to sit on; how, though they appeared to be of the same age, she gave her her arm as they left the building; and with what anxious watchfulness she wrapped and pinned her shawl around her. The spectacle was humanizing enough to have moderated the cynicism of the curiosity with which this mysterious couple was regarded. But people could not forgive them for living such absolutely self-contained lives, for concealing their past under an impenetrable silence, and for suggesting a mystery which neither of them

would so much as deign a glance or a whisper to explain.

The theory that Mrs. Dartrell was mad, and that Mrs. Bland was her keeper, was exploded by the death of the latter. The old lady outlived her faithful attendant many years, served by a maid hired from London. This girl, before she grew too old for frivolity, was a bit of a coquette, and as free with her tongue as most servant-girls usually are; but though she was vigorously plied with questions respecting her mistress's past life, she could answer nothing simply because she knew nothing. She said that Mrs. Dartrell was a very kind, gentle, quiet old woman, quite a lady, and that it was a real pleasure to wait upon her; that at the beginning she would shed tears when she spoke of Mrs. Bland, and lament that she had lost her dear friend, the only friend she had in the wide world; but that was all. To the disappointment, probably, of the gossips, they learnt that Mrs. Dartrell lived in every respect like a Christian and a gentlewoman; constantly read the Bible, was fond of flowers, and took great pleasure in her garden; played the piano very agreeably, lived quietly but comfortably, and occasionally amused herself by

writing in a volume that locked with a clasp; but what she wrote, she—the servant—could not say, unless it was poetry.

About five years before Mrs. Dartrell died, there came to D—— a curate, a conscientious, upright man, since risen to a distinguished position in the church, who became acquainted with the old lady through her falling into a sudden sickness. The servant, whilst returning from summoning the doctor, met the clergyman in the street, and told him of her mistress's illness. Mrs. Dartrell recovered; the curate called; and thus began a friendship which was terminated only by the old lady's death.

The result of this friendship was that Mrs. Dartrell took the curate into her confidence, and told him the story of her life. That life she had already written. She bequeathed, together with a more substantial testimony of her friendship, the manuscript volume to the curate, with a request that a transcript should be made from its contents and sent to certain persons, whose names she gave. The rest of her property she distributed among charities connected with D——. The curate did as he was desired—had the transcript made and forwarded to the

persons designated in the will. Whether the story narrates an actual experience, or whether it be an ingenious fable of the old lady, designed as a rebuke to those gossips, of whose inquisitiveness she must have been long aware, may be left to you to determine. The manuscript story, after having lain by for a great number of years, is now made public, in the hope that it may interest a larger section of readers than those who remember "Old Mrs. Dartrell," and whose curiosity the mention of her name is pretty certain to excite.

CHAPTER I.

ASHLEIGH MANOR.

ON the south-eastern coast of England, about a mile from the sea, there stands, and will probably stand for many years to come, a curiously built house called Ashleigh Manor.

In what year the house was built is not known. The complications of what I must call its "style" would puzzle an architect to discriminate. The nucleus of the building was probably a small house constructed in a pre-Elizabethan age. The posterity of the first occupant of the place multiplying, wings were added to enlarge the accommodation. To these wings fresh apartments were added yet; and still more rooms were found necessary. Step by step, new wings, new chambers, new abutments planted their encroaching feet upon the land. By the time the

builders had finished with their additions, the house had become as heterogeneous as a dozen different styles of architecture could make it.

Yet despite the complexities of its ornature and fashion, the house—if, indeed, such a composite babel of a building can be called a house—is one to be admired. In the first place it is wonderfully picturesque. Its ruggedness would, perhaps, better harmonise with a mountainous district than with the flat, verdant, highly-cultivated plains which stretch with long and easy undulations to the cliff. Time has wielded his magic brush, and made the building lovely with a hundred mellow tints. Many windows flash back the sparkling beams of the sun. To the right the wings are castellated. To the left they stand with plain level tops, decreasing in height, and terminating in a single spacious apartment. The house is situated in the centre of a large park, which represents but a small portion of the whole estate. Elm and chestnut and oak tower high and completely shut out the building from the highway. To do it justice, you must stand full in the centre of the avenue, and choose a summer evening for your inspection, when the trees are heavy and slumberous with leaves, and when the wester-

ing sun levels its crimson rules of light upon the castellated wings, turning their windows into ruby-coloured flames, and steeping the upper stories in purple, but leaving the eastern side cold, and gloomy and rugged in the cool and darkling shadows.

It was on a summer's evening when I received my first impression of Ashleigh Manor. Though full of timidity and embarrassment as I crept with a beating heart along the well-crushed gravel of the avenue, I had yet sufficient nerve to admire with delight the imposing spectacle of the house as it rose in its solemn strength and splendid ruggedness before me. The rooks were cawing overhead; but there was a deep stillness under the twilight of the trees, where the velvet sward stretched like a carpet, green and cool and moist. The upper windows of the house were resplendent with crimson suns, each with a little glory radiating from it like burning threads of gold. At the first blush the building looked larger than it was. It seemed to me a confused pile of masonry, heaped with a certain rich artistic negligence: a rude and rugged poem in stone. The hall door was small, but solid and studded with nobs of black iron like the portal of a dungeon.

Four short but massive and handsome pillars supporting a covered arch of stone formed the portico. On either side the door were two tall windows, of which the burnished, many-paned glass lay level with the wall, like the windows of the red-brick Georgian school of building. With the flint-work stretching a few feet beyond these windows terminated the original house—the nucleus of the present pile. From its narrow dimensions it was easy to guess the prodigious amount of masonry of which it had been the parent.

What was I, a young girl of eighteen, drooping under the weight of a small bag, doing alone in that avenue?

My answer is, I had been engaged as governess by Mrs. Merton.

I felt very nervous. I had walked from Ashleigh, where the coach had set me down: and having passed through the ordeal of certain interrogatories from the black-browed janitor who guarded the entrance to the estate, was now timorously advancing to the house.

My heart beat quickly. I was very young and inexperienced: and the spectacle of the great wing-flanked building oppressed me with a troublesome sense of insignificance and

unworthiness. What reception should I get? Would not Mrs. Merton think me very bold and self-satisfied to consider myself qualified to hold the place of governess in such a lordly house as hers? The moment my eye rested on the building, I involuntarily exclaimed, "Had I known it was such a great place, I should never have dared accept the lady's offer."

It was too late, however, to draw back now. I mounted the short flight of steps and pulled the bell with a nervous hand. After a long interval which made me imagine that I had come to the wrong door—I was sure that there was another entrance by having remarked a carriage-drive branching off from the avenue along which I had advanced—the door was opened and a man-servant stood forth dressed in a suit of black. He looked at me; I looked at him. I hardly knew what to say, how to introduce myself. He glanced civilly enough from my face to my bag, and with a short cough asked what I might want.

"I am Miss Malcolmson, the governess;" I replied.

"Oh, please step in, miss," he exclaimed with alacrity. "You ought to have come to the other door, round by the west wing,

miss, and you wouldn't have been kept waiting."

I entered and found myself in a narrow hall, strangely out of keeping with the size of the house. A few sombre pictures in gloomy frames hung around it, and made it yet narrower by their projection. Light was admitted by a small stained glass window. I cast my eyes around and saw that there were several doors ranged on either side of the hall. I could not help wondering that the last architect who had dealt with Ashleigh Manor had not enlarged the hall into a proper correspondency with the dimensions of the building.

I could see no staircase; with its range of closed doors the hall, or passage rather, was a veritable cul de sac. The footman led me to the uttermost door of the left-hand range and admitted me into a small room plainly furnished, and asked me to be seated whilst he went and told Mrs. Saunders that I was come. Who Mrs. Saunders was I knew not; Mrs. Merton was the name of the lady I had corresponded with.

Meanwhile the footman left the room, causing me to wonder where the staircase could be. Facing me was a grim picture

whose outlines disclosed themselves when my eyes got used to the dim and slowly-dying light. It was a portrait of the celebrated Erasmus of Rotterdam, by whom painted I never gathered; doubtless a copy, and probably a poor one, or I question if it would have been hung in an out-of-the-way anteroom. The background was a dead black, the features of the man were yellow and famished like those of a corpse, but his eyes were small and keen and glared upon me with imperturbable severity under the ugly skull-cap.

In about ten minutes' time the door opened and a well-dressed woman entered.

I made sure that she must be the mistress and rose and bowed to her. She was dressed in black silk with a gold chain round her neck, and had rather a stern face, but not wholly unpleasing even at the first view. She curtsied in return to my bow in a very friendly way, and said,

"Miss Laura expected you two hours ago."

I answered timidly,

"I walked rapidly, madam; I suspect the coach was late."

"Oh, pray don't madam me, miss," cried she, heartily. "I am only plain Mrs. Saun-

ders, the housekeeper. If you have walked from Ashleigh you must be tired. I thought Mrs. Merton would have sent a carriage to meet you, but I wouldn't name it to her, and when you know her you'll understand why. I suppose your luggage will follow ?"

"Yes."

"Let me carry that bag for you, miss."

I was about to beg her not to be at that trouble when she cut me short by taking the bag and going to the door by which she had entered. I followed her. She entered another small room, which communicated with another room yet.

"It will take you a week to find your way about," said she, laughing. "The house is like a maze. But there are bells in some of the rooms, and you can always ring should you ever find yourself at a loss. Though after all you won't have anything to do with this part of the house. Mr. and Mrs. Merton occupy the west wing."

We passed through these rooms and I then found myself in a spacious square chamber, furnished like a hall, with a narrow staircase. We went up that staircase which was almost dark, and reached a landing from which three passages diverged.

I could not help exclaiming,

"What a curious house! It is like the catacombs under Rome."

"We are not out of the old part of the building yet," she replied. "The rooms are large and handsome in the wings. I have always said that master ought to knock all these old passages and rooms into a large hall. There would be quite enough rooms left to lodge a regiment of soldiers in. All this part is never occupied."

She took the left hand passage, and having walked some distance down it, she turned and went up a staircase.

"Here is your bedroom," she said, halting before a door. "At the end is the room in which you will hear Miss Laura her lessons. It is a very cheerful room; I will show it to you presently."

She then ushered me into my bedroom. A fine large apartment it was, with no less than four windows in it. It was at the back of the house and overlooked a wide extent of the grounds. It was comfortably but not very richly furnished. The bedstead was an almost new four-poster, for which I was thankful, having an insuperable objection to those gaunt black pieces of furniture in whose grim

arms one is so often compelled to lie in old-fashioned houses. The window curtains were of green chintz; the carpet was a warm thick Brussels; there were a few cheerful oil paintings, sea and country pieces, around the walls, and some pretty china, with a handsome clock, on the mantelpiece.

"I think you'll be comfortable here," said Mrs. Saunders. "The room is very cheerful in the morning, for it gets the sun upon it."

"I am sure I shall be very comfortable," I answered.

"This will be Miss Laura's room," she continued, going to a door which led from my apartment.

I peeped in and saw a pretty little bedroom.

"Does she always sleep there?" I asked.

"No, she sleeps now near her mamma. It is Mrs. Merton's wish that Miss Laura should be with you. Before I leave you to see if Mrs. Merton has come in, would you like to look at your sitting-room?"

I answered, "Yes," and she led me down the passage and into a large semi-circular chamber filled with red velvet chairs and couches, with an immense old-fashioned mirror over the mantelpiece. At the end of the room was

an oak bookcase lined with volumes; and in the centre a walnut-wood table, on which stood a very elegant bronze-stemmed candle-lamp. There were two tall windows furnished with lace curtains. Through them I saw the red sun throbbing behind the trees, streaking the deep evening sky with gorgeous tints of rose and gold and green.

"This is a beautiful room," I exclaimed, looking around. "I like it very much."

"It is meant for you, miss. It will be your living-room. You and Miss Laura will breakfast and dine here. Of an evening, I believe, you will go to the drawing-room and sit with Mr. and Mrs. Merton until it is time to go to bed."

The programme suited me. I felt that I should be very independent with this handsome cheerful room to myself.

"Now," said Mrs. Saunders, "I'll go and tell Mrs. Merton you have come, while you take off your things. She is sure to want to see you as soon as ever she hears that you are here: and as she's very impatient, perhaps you won't mind being ready for me by the time I come back."

"I will take care to be ready," I replied.

I returned to my bedroom, whilst she went

down stairs. It took me a very few moments to remove my bonnet and smooth my hair. but it was nearly a quarter of an hour before Mrs. Saunders returned to conduct me down stairs. Let me take advantage of the interval to detain you in a brief chat about the causes which had led to my undertaking the position of governess to Miss Laura Merton, of Ashleigh Manor.

CHAPTER II.

CONTAINING A SHORT ACCOUNT OF MY EARLY LIFE.

IT is true enough and natural enough, too, that people are always anxious to see you independent when your dependence is a tax upon their income. Papa and mamma are the only persons who do not sincerely grudge the bread they cut and the butter they spread for you. Beyond *them*, little kindness is done that is not charity. And what charity is more acidulated than that which comes from relations? How bitter is an aunt's bread! how tasteless a cousin's mutton! how unpalatable the flavour of the cup which even, God help us! a sister's, a brother's hand proffers! It should be otherwise—but is it? Who truly represent and substantially compose what is called, the hard, cold world? Are they not your relations?

Ask yonder old man of business who helped him in his early struggles. Was it Mary his sister, Jack his old playmate and cousin, Uncle Darby and Aunt Joan, folks who could have helped him had they chosen? Or was it Smith, and Jones, and Brown? Be independent of your relations and they will coax and court, flatter and fawn, and talk of you to their friends, and have you at their tables, and press gifts upon you. But be in want, and they will shun you, their doors will be closed against you, your faded shawl is the signal for downcast eyes, your worn coat serves you like an invisible mantle if they meet you in the streets. Or at most their charities will be of such a souring kind as will make you despise and scorn yourself for not having fortitude enough to remain hungry in the independency of want—for poverty has its freedom: is not the wide world the beggar's home?—rather than touch the niggardly gift they offer with wrinkled noses and averted faces.

My mother and father dying when I was eight years old, I was made pretty keenly to feel how cruel and galling is the dependence that owes its support to the care of relations. I was taken charge of by my aunt, my mo-

ther's sister. Mrs. Wellwood was of a very different nature from my mother. Had she married a kind and loving husband I dare say she would have been much more womanly in many respects, with softer and fairer opinions of the world, and a more genial address. But, unhappily, Mr. Wellwood, who died six years after their nuptials, had been a man of a very coarse nature, though sprung from a respectable Dorsetshire family. His temper, which was naturally violent, had been aggravated by drink, a vice which in those days was esteemed a decoration. That fashion has been reversed in this age; and I am told that drunkenness is considered by gentlemen as low and unmanly as swearing and ill-manners towards women.

Mr. Wellwood had been a flourishing farmer when he courted my aunt, and she had been greatly applauded by her father and mother for accepting his hand. Whereas my mother had been guilty of the unpardonable sin of marrying for love; which is another way for saying that Mr. Malcolmson was poor.

Yet poor as he was, he contrived to support his wife and child whilst he lived without being indebted to his relatives for a single farthing. And had his health been better

we should have made a far more respectable figure than we did; though we could well afford to dispense with superfluous splendour, since the brightest and most imperishable wealth was ours—I mean love; a more devoted couple than my father and mother never came together, and although I was but eight years old when I found myself an orphan I still clearly remember the deep and happy love that shone in their eyes when they looked on one another, and the world of tenderness and kisses they showered upon me, the little sunny-haired pledge of their pure affection.

Though my aunt had a great deal more money than my mother when she began her married life, she was far from happy. Shortly after her baby was born, Mr. Wellwood began to indulge in that intemperate habit of drink which afterwards cost him his life. Then commenced a very sorrowful career for Mrs. Wellwood. Her husband neglected his farm: and in proportion as the value of his property decayed his taste for extravagance increased: so that in a few years he had lowered a flourishing concern which had yielded him no less than twelve hundred a year into a mortgaged jeopardised estate, from which the family

barely drew a sufficient income to enable them to support life with decency. His death unquestionably saved my aunt and her son from absolute beggary; for when his complicated affairs were examined the lawyers discovered, after the property had been sold and the creditors paid, enough money would remain to yield the widow an income of about two hundred a year; which was a very tolerable living in those days of cheap comforts and moderate house-rents.

But my aunt had been made poor in another sense than that implied by the loss of money. She had had her good nature spoiled, her temper soured, and her heart made sullen beneath the dark shadow which her husband's behaviour and loose course of life had thrown over her. I ought, perhaps, to think kindly of her, for she took me in when I was friendless and alone in the world and kept me for ten years. Yet I should be very hypocritical were I to pretend to recall her with any degree of tenderness. She treated me with great harshness. She always gave me to know in the most heartless and passionate way that I was a dependent, a pauper, who had no right to be eating her son's bread. I should have been less broken-spirited by her

treatment had we been alone, for her outbreaks though frequent were not incessant. Sometimes I went a month without hearing from her that I was a beggar: and these breathing spaces would have given me time to have plucked up my heart again, for a child's spirit cannot be long depressed. But her son took up her song when she had ceased, and baited and worried and wounded me incessantly with his insinuations or down-right charges of pauperism and dependence. This son was named Henry. Nature had supplemented the character which he inherited from his father, with a few original qualities unpossessed by either parent. He could lie with astonishing gravity and assurance: and as lies generally presuppose something vicious or wrongful to conceal, so when I assure you that he was constantly telling falsehoods you may judge how numerous were the naughty actions of which he was guilty. Mrs. Wellwood did not send him to school; nor was he regularly taken to church. He was much neglected, and so was I, for the matter of that. Happily for me, I was somewhat a precocious child, and thanks to my mother's careful training I was as far advanced at eight years of age as a good many girls are

at sixteen. Having nothing to do all day long at my aunt's, I read and studied a great deal, and by this means got to lay in a larger stock of information than I should have acquired had I been sent to school; for I studied for my pleasure and understood and relished what I read; whereas had I had a teacher I might have been put to many unpalatable and therefore unprofitable tasks.

I will hurry over this part of my life. It has nothing to do with my story, nor is the memory of it at all agreeable.

I will not positively affirm that my aunt treated me cruelly, but she made me suffer a very great deal through my sensitiveness. She was a passionate woman, and did not at all care what she said, nor reflect how her bitter words might rankle and fester in my young heart. All those hard years were spent by me in an anxious longing for liberty —one deep desire to get away from my hard-hearted relatives. The mother gave all the love she was capable of feeling to her son. I cried a great deal in secret, and was for ever planning to leave the house, and seek a living in the world. There were times when, had I been offered a servant's place, I should unhesitatingly have accepted it. To

make matters worse, when I was in my seventeenth year, my cousin took it into his head to fall in love with me. Had he been an honest, kind-hearted young man I should have liked him none the worse for the compliment he paid me—though, let his character have been what it would, I never could have had any other feeling towards him than that of cousinly kindness. He was not only deformed in the legs, but exceedingly plain in the face, being, indeed, a grotesque portrait of his father who, in his palmiest days, was never tolerable-looking. But Master Henry not only drank like his father before him, but was abnormally passionate, deceitful, and sinister in his nature; besides, he had treated me with great cruelty when I had first come to live with his mother, and I could not forgive him for it.

It took me some time to understand the nature of the change that came over him when he fell in love; I could not guess what he meant by following me about with his eyes, and staring at me, and breathing quickly when he took my hand on meeting in the morning or parting at night. But one day he came home flushed with drink, and finding me alone, sat down by my side, and in a

tearful voice said that he was in love with me, and asked if I would marry him. I hardly knew how I answered. I was much disgusted by his manner, and heartily offended at his daring to fall in love with me. At all events my reply made him terribly angry; he swore at me after the manly and genteel fashion of those days, and left me. What he told his mother I know not. I don't think she suspected what had passed between us, but I noticed that her severity towards me increased from that day, and I clearly saw the time was at hand when it would be quite impossible for me to remain any longer under her roof.

One morning I accidentally found a newspaper which Master Henry had brought home with him, probably from one of the alehouses, and, in looking over it, I came across an advertisement for a governess.

Up to that moment the notion that I might get my living by teaching had never entered my head. But when I read that advertisement, and observed how slight were the qualifications demanded, and how the age of the person wanted corresponded with my own, I determined to answer it.

I remember that I was so greatly excited I

could scarce hold my pen, and several sheets of letter paper were destroyed before I could produce a composition that satisfied me. I wrote with all the candour of a young and inexperienced girl. I told the advertiser who my parents were, that I was an orphan, that my acquirements were limited, but that what I knew I knew thoroughly; that I was very anxious to earn a living for myself, and that I was quite sure I would suit if she would but grant me a trial. I gave the missive to the letter-carrier when he called, and for five days lived in a torture of suspense.

Then came the answer. The letter was sealed with an imposing crest, and I blushed at my intrepidity when I read my own name on the packet.

My aunt was present; she eyed the letter sullenly, but made no comment. The terms of the enclosure were sufficiently brief:

"Mrs. Merton presents her compliments to Miss Malcolmson, and begs to inform her that she will be happy to entertain her application for the situation offered in the advertisement referred to, if Miss Malcolmson will send her a testimonial from the clergyman of the parish in which she resides. On receipt of the testimonial Mrs. Merton will, if she

finds it desirable, enter into other particulars respecting the situation."

This was the answer. I read it with a flushed face and beating heart; and making an effort to steady my voice, said to my aunt,

"I have been thinking for some time that I have no right to burden you with my support any longer. I saw an advertisement the other day for a governess, and answered it. Here is the lady's reply."

I handed her the letter. She read it, and said to me, in a more friendly tone than I ever remembered her using to me before,

"I am glad you are making this effort. It has also occurred to me for some time that my income will hardly sustain the charge of your keep much longer. Harry has grown extravagant, and things are much dearer than they were when you first came to me. Mr. Marlow," she added, mentioning the name of the vicar, "will give you the testimonial you require, I am sure. You are regular at church, and that must have pleased him. If you like I will also write a letter to Mrs. Merton which you can enclose. You may leave it to me to sound your praises."

I saw that she was delighted at the prospect

of getting rid of me; but I had not her bad taste to let her see how rejoiced I was at the prospect of leaving her. That afternoon I called upon the vicar, who met me very cordially and kindly, and wrote me a most flattering testimonial. He said that he had known me for seven years; that I was one of the most regular attendants at church in his parish; that I was well spoken of and much liked by all who knew me, with a good deal more, which I need not repeat. To this testimonial Mrs. Wellwood added a most eulogistic letter praising me for virtues which, whether I possessed them or not, she had never appeared to notice in me before then. She assured Mrs. Merton that she deeply lamented my leaving her, told her what a comfort I had been to her in her hours of sickness, with a heap of other statements that contributed to establish her in my mind as a most arrant and unblushing hypocrite.

However, it answered her purpose to write this letter, and my vanity would not allow me to believe that I might be acting unfairly to Mrs. Merton by sending it, for I sincerely believed I possessed most of the good qualities which my aunt had indicated: which belief made *her* disingenuousness immaterial.

I waited a week with more impatience and agitation than I can describe, and was then rewarded by receiving a letter from Mrs. Merton, in which she wrote that the enclosures I had forwarded were satisfactory, and that she would be happy to give me a trial for three months, at a salary of sixty pounds. She added that she would defer entering into particulars respecting the duties I was to perform until we met.

My aunt lived within an eight hours' ride by coach of Ashleigh, and, happily, the route was a direct one. I wrote to inform Mrs. Merton that I gratefully accepted her offer, and hoped to have the pleasure of waiting upon her by Monday week. The delay was necessary in order to give me time to equip myself with a needful outfit. My aunt did did not mind going to a little expense to get rid of me, and bought me some dresses, of which I stood sorely in need, and helped me with her needle to complete my wardrobe.

When the day of departure came she saw me to the coach, and gave me five pounds, parting from me with as great a show of pleasure as a friend would exhibit in her welcome. For my part I was equally glad to leave her and her son. The world, indeed, was all

before me; for I was sure that if I failed to suit Mrs. Merton my aunt would not receive me back. But these considerations did not depress in the slightest the exhilaration I felt at being free. Even had my aunt positively avowed her determination never to receive me again I should not have cared in the least, since I had made up my mind never to return to her, but to push my way as best I might up the ladder, on whose first step fortune had planted my foot.

And now having already acquainted you with my arrival at Ashleigh Manor, let me drop the curtain for ever on my aunt and her son, and begin in good earnest the narrative I have sat down to write.

CHAPTER III.

I INTRODUCE MYSELF TO MRS. MERTON AND MEET MY PUPIL.

WHEN Mrs. Saunders came in she said :

"I am sorry to have kept you waiting, miss ; but Mrs. Merton was walking in the grounds, and I had to search for her to let her know you were here. She is in the drawing-room, if you will please to follow me."

I followed her along the corridor and down the stairs, traversed a long passage, and gained a gallery. Here was an arched window, and beneath the gallery was a species of court, with a tesselated floor, of which the colours were faded. There were arched doors on either side the court, and I was struck by the damp, mortary smell, as though we were in a crypt or an old church.

I would have paused here to ask Mrs. Saunders some questions, but she was walking impatiently forwards. Never could I have conceived so strange and tortuous a building as this had I not seen it with my own eyes. It was as great a curiosity of architecture as any abbey or castle in the land; and I was prepared to learn that it had its renown, and its visitors among antiquaries and learned people.

We had to pass out of the corridor through rooms, nearly all which were plainly furnished, some, indeed, unfurnished, and many without fireplaces. I could not help thinking that the house would make a very good prison or barracks, and wondered at the perverse hereditary taste that could prefer adding to such a wilderness of a building instead of pulling it down, and erecting in its place, and with the old materials, a substantial and comfortable modern house.

I called to Mrs. Saunders, who was flitting on ahead of me:

"If this place should ever take fire, I for one am certain to be burnt, for I should never be able to find my way out."

"You'll soon get used to it," she replied. "I was quite at sea when I first came here;

but I could make my way in the dark to any room in the house now."

"Have all these rooms names?"

"I daresay," she said, "but I have never heard them. Mr. and Mrs. Merton wholly occupy the west wing, and seldom leave it. There is a hall-door to that wing; indeed it is like a separate house. This is it," she continued; and as she spoke she opened a little door, and we entered a spacious hall quite modern in construction compared to the rest of the building. It was lighted at one end by a noble window, richly illuminated with stained glass; a large brass lamp hung from the centre; on the left was a gallery, to which access was had by a flight of stone steps. There were four doors around the hall, and two at the extremity, one being that from which we issued. Facing me was the house door. This was evidently quite new. I noticed two handsome marble busts over it; and though the evening light was most imperfect, I could see that the hall furniture was very fine and massive; chairs of ancient date richly carved; tables gilt like those we see in drawing-rooms. There was a deep silence, and our footfalls echoed hollowly as we walked across the slippery tiles.

Mrs. Saunders knocked on one of the doors, opened it, and bade me enter. I did so, and she closed the door behind me.

I looked around. I was in a large luxurious room, of which the first impression was a confusion of soft velvety colours, rich white lace, and the gleam of silver and gilt. The air was heavy with the fragrance of flowers, and no wonder, for a conservatory ran round two sides of the room, and the windows leading into it were open.

A lady reclined on a sofa, and a short distance from her sat a little girl. I advanced towards them and bowed very timidly, being almost overcome with the oppressive air of wealth and luxury suggested by the room. Indeed the effect was made more imposing by contrast with the chill, austere chambers I had just passed through. The lady sat up when I drew near, and giving me a slight bow, desired me in a rather imperious manner to be seated. I was going to take a chair some distance off, but seeing my intention, she exclaimed fretfully:

"Please come nearer, Miss Malcolmson; we shall not be able to hear each other speak if you sit there."

"This is my daughter Laura," she said. "Laura, shake hands with Miss Malcolmson."

The child, a sweet-faced little fair-haired girl of ten, left her chair, and came and stood at my knee. I should liked to have kissed her, but I was hardly sure whether haughty Mrs. Merton would not consider it a liberty.

"I am very glad to know you, dear," I said to her in a low voice. "I hope we shall become great friends."

She gave me a very winning smile, and looked up at me quite fearlessly, which pleased me to see. I have a natural aversion to shy children. One is never sure of their characters. Meanwhile Mrs. Merton had been running her eye over my dress, and attentively examining my face. The result of her inspection was probably satisfactory, for she said graciously:

"I omitted to tell you in my letter that though I advertised for a governess for Laura, my real wish was rather to procure her a companion than a teacher. She is my only child; and as I have little time to bestow on her, she is, of necessity, very often dull. Of course it is not my wish that you should neglect her education. You will please put her through

a regular course of studies. When she is fifteen I shall send her to a fashionable school; but I consider her too young now to mingle with the diverse characters which are to be met with in schools."

I inquired if I was the first governess Miss Laura had had.

"No; I engaged the services of a very accomplished person a year ago. But her health was so bad that she was obliged to leave."

Here she began to fan herself very indolently.

"Lorry," she exclaimed peevishly, "do sit down. Why do you remain standing like a statue at Miss Malcolmson's knee?"

The little creature returned to her chair at once. The sharp obedience of the act seemed to me to tell a suggestive tale of severity or bad temper.

"Is it not oppressively warm?" exclaimed Mrs. Merton, fanning herself lustily. "I am sure the smell of flowers makes the air hotter. I suppose Mrs. Saunders has shown you your bedroom?"

"Yes, madam."

"Lorry will sleep with you—that is, in an adjoining chamber. She will be quite in your

charge. She knows I have very little time to devote to her. Have you seen your sitting-room ?"

I answered in the affirmative, and added that I thought it a very comfortable, pleasant room. She shrugged her shoulders, and said:

"I daresay you think the house a very wonderful building, don't you ?"

"It is rather puzzling," I answered with a smile, "but I shall hope very soon to be able to find my way about."

"Oh, the way to the drawing-room is quite direct, and your bedroom and sitting-room are on the same floor. As to the rest of the house it is seldom occupied except in the hunting season, when Mr. Merton stuffs those dungeons of rooms with his sporting friends. I will leave your actions with respect to Lorry entirely to your own discretion. I never prescribe any rules, because I argue that a governess ought to know her business better than I can teach her. We dine at six. You and Lorry will join us in the drawing-room at half-past seven, and remain with us until it is time for Lorry to go to bed. Mr. Merton is fond of having his child with him ; but I do not think it advisable for a little girl to be so much with her elders ; it makes her pre-

cocious, and what can be more detestable than precocious children ?"

While she spoke I examined her. There was a bright crimson in the sky, which gave light enough to see, but hardly to criticise her face by. She had a fine figure, commanding in height, and she was very richly dressed in green silk, with white lace flowers. She wore a great quantity of jewellery—rings, a magnificent brooch, a black gold chain, and handsome bracelets. And there was some jewelled ornament in her hair. Her head was small, her complexion dark, her nose Jewish. She had large black piercing eyes, and thin, but well-defined, eyebrows. Her lips were very red and full—too full. She did not look like an English woman, though her pronunciation left me in no doubt as to her nationality. Her habitual air, it struck me, seemed one of languor; yet, from time to time, and for no reason that I could see, she would start abruptly from her listlessness, and speak and gesticulate with singular energy.

Her little girl, on the other hand, was very fair, very small, white, delicate, fairy-like. I have told you that she was ten, because I afterwards got to hear that that was her age,

but she certainly did not look more than six or seven. I had much liked the pretty infantile expression that came into her face when she smiled at me, and the calm, brave look in her young eyes; yet I had taken notice that no sooner had her mother bid her return to her chair than the sweeter part of her youthfulness died out of her countenance, and she appeared scared, and wistful, and grave.

"I am expecting some friends this evening," said Mrs. Merton, "and I will not ask you to join us, as I am sure you must be tired after your long journey. Lorry will keep you company, and you and she can drink tea in your sitting-room. You understand that I consign the child wholly to your guardianship. I will watch her progress, but will not interfere. If I witness at the end of three months any improvement in her mind and manners, I shall, of course, know that your influence is beneficial, If not....."

She paused, and showed a very white set of teeth in a rather odd smile.

"I will do my very best. I shall be anxious to please you."

"Of course you can't do more than your best. I hope for both our sakes that your

best will satisfy my expectations. Did you not tell me in your letter that you were eighteen ?"

" Yes, madam."

" You are still a girl. It is possible to be a child at eighteen. I wish I were as young as you. How old should you take me to be, Miss Malcolmson ?"

I had mixed so little in the world that I wanted the knowledge to see that she wished me to flatter her. At the same time my instincts as a woman told me that I was on delicate ground, and must tread carefully. After surveying her with respectful and smiling attention for a few moments, during which she watched me with curious solicitude, I answered, glancing at Laura :

" I should say that you are not yet thirty?"

She laughed rapturously—quite loudly—clapping her hands together briskly, and looking at me with glowing eyes.

" You are wrong ! you are wrong ! I was past twenty when I married. And do you really think I don't look thirty ? I will tell Mr. Merton—it piques him to fancy I am young-looking. Lorry, you ought to be charmed at having so young-looking a mamma."

"Miss Malcolmson can't see you," answered Laura. "You don't look so *very* young when there is plenty of light."

Mrs. Merton went into a passion on the spot.

"You're a wicked child!" she cried. "You are the most provoking, contradictory little creature anybody ever met! How dare you make such remarks to me!"

And she shook her fan at the child so menacingly that I was afraid she was going to throw it at her.

"I charge you," she exclaimed, turning upon me and staring with eyes that glittered quite fiercely, "I charge you never to spare any severity that you may find needful in dealing with this perverse girl."

The suddenness of the outbreak quite terrified me. I looked at Laura, who glanced at me furtively, swinging her leg, but not appearing greatly to mind her mother's wrath. I thought Mrs. Merton's show of temper singularly undignified, and was astounded at the capricious vanity that could be so easily delighted and so easily offended. She fanned herself passionately, and presently cried out:

"To-morrow you shall see me in full daylight and then judge whether I am such an

old creature as that child yonder would have you think!"

And she darted a look at Laura, the hate or rage of which made it quite incredible.

While I watched her Mrs. Saunders' words came into my head. She had told me that she did not suggest to Mrs. Merton that a carriage should be sent to meet me, and had added, "When you know her you will understand why." A period pregnant with significance! It seemed to me that I could understand why, now. It was plain as her face that Mrs. Merton had a violent temper; and from the manner in which she had relished my answer to her question about her age, I was afraid that I should find other bad qualities in her before I had been long in the house. It was impossible that so much vanity and temper could subsist without generating a world of moral deformities. I was thankful that the scheme of life enjoined me by her would keep me pretty well out of her company, and felt that in order to get on with her I should require more tact than my inexperienced mind could exert.

"Now, Laura," said her mother, speaking to her as though she were a servant, "I

daresay Miss Malcolmson hasn't tasted food since the morning. Take her upstairs and order tea."

Laura rose at once, and so did I.

"Ring the bell first for the footman to light you up. You know that you won't be able to see your way through the dark rooms without a candle."

I went to the bell-rope and pulled it, though the order had been given to Laura. I cannot describe how much it pained me to hear this pretty little child addressed by her mother so rudely and passionately. I came back and stood by her side. We remained silent until the footman entered. Meanwhile I felt Laura groping about for my hand; I gave it her, and tenderly pressed her wee fingers, much charmed and gratified by this unexpected and naïve endearment.

When the footman came Mrs. Merton ordered him imperiously to "bring candles and light Miss Malcolmson and Miss Laura to the Red Room," for so was my private apartment designated. Nor was the silence broken again until the footman returned, Mrs. Merton contenting herself with angrily plying her fan, and Laura and I standing hand in hand in the gathering gloom, both of us,

no doubt, equally anxious to escape from this atmosphere, made difficult to breathe through its load of perfume, and the presence of the enraged mistress of the house.

Good heaven! was it possible that any sane woman could be so easily infuriated by the remark of a mere baby? I hardly liked to look at her, but it was needful for me to steal from time to time a timid glance, to persuade myself that this lady was in earnest in her passion.

What sort of life, I wondered, did Mr. Merton lead with her?

We gained the Red Room, elegantly heralded by a brilliant fellow in pea-green and silver, (the gentleman in the black clothes, who had opened the door to me, was the butler,) and sincerely glad was I to find myself alone with Laura. Here, at least, I was monarch of all I surveyed, and really delightful were my petty dominions. The footman drew the curtains, lighted the candle-lamp and other candles on the chimney-piece, and I gazed around me upon an apartment comfortable even to luxury.

"Will you have tea, miss, now?" inquired the footman.

I answered yes, and he withdrew. As

soon as the door was closed I took Laura on my lap and kissed her.

"I am very glad to be alone with you, dear. Ever since I accepted your mamma's offer to come here I have been longing to see you, to know what my little pupil is like. I am sure I shall love you: and I mean to try very hard to make you love me."

"You will be kind to me, won't you? You have pretty eyes. I like your face, and you talk in a low voice. Do you ever get in a passion?"

"Very seldom. I must be very cruelly treated to lose my temper," I replied, thinking of my aunt's and cousin's behaviour, and how meekly I had endured it on the whole.

"Is not mamma quick in the way she speaks?" she asked, looking up with her fresh blue eyes.

"I am afraid that you vexed her by what you said."

"Oh, she is very often angry with me, and for nothing at all. Papa loves me more than she does. Have you seen papa yet?"

"Not yet."

"He is such a dear kind papa to me. When he is in the room he never allows mamma to speak crossly to me. He loves

me very much, Miss Malcolmson. He calls me his little pet lamb. He always comes to kiss me and say good-night when I am in bed. He will leave all the fine company that mamma asks here to come and kiss me."

"Does much company come here?"

"A great deal. Not many people come now because papa says that most of our friends are in London. But in winter mamma gives a great many balls. She does not care for me to be in the drawing-room when she gives a ball."

"I dare say not," said I, laughing; "you must wait until you are bigger, and then she will be glad to have you."

"It is not because I can't dance; I can dance very well. Mamma doesn't like to have me near her, because she says I make her look old."

"Indeed! did she tell you this?"

"No, she told Captain Fowler. She did not know I heard. I was in the conservatory."

"Who is Captain Fowler?"

"A *great* friend of mamma's."

"And of your papa's, too, I suppose?"

"No; papa doesn't like him. Mamma and papa often quarrel about Captain Fowler."

"Before you?"

"It's not papa's fault. Mamma often says aggravating things. Then papa grows pale. I am always afraid when papa is angry. He looks very dreadful."

The subject was growing rather painful. I changed it by asking her if she liked her last governess.

"Not much. She was so stiff and stern."

"Did she occupy this room?"

"Yes."

"And did you sleep in a room next to hers?"

She answered yes, by which she gave me to see that she and I were beginning no new routine. I asked her where she had slept since the governess had left, and she replied, in a room near her mamma's. I spoke to her about the house, and asked if strangers in the neighbourhood were not surprised to see what a rambling, wild, old place it was. By her answer I gathered that the place was as well known as I had suspected it would be, and that it was reckoned the great curiosity of the county. People, she said, would often come from a long distance to Ashleigh for the sole purpose of going over the Manor.

I further understood by her replies to my questions that her mother disliked the place, but that her father, on the contrary, was very fond of it. It would seem that it had been in his family a great number of years, and that it was his grandfather who had completed the handsome wing which the family now occupied.

By this conversation I found Laura a very intelligent child, and a thorough little lady in her manner of speaking and her behaviour. It appeared to me that her pretty well-bred airs and ways were less due to her training than to her instincts. She was intuitively a lady, which delighted me to see, because I knew that I should find her tractable, and amiable, and gentle.

Presently the footman entered with the tea-tray. To my bucolic mind, educated to no greater height of domesticity than my aunt's sordid solitary maidservant, this fine and handsome gentleman in silver trappings and well-shaped stockings, appeared a most wonderfully complaisant creature to condescend to carry a tea-tray, and wait upon me. He made me feel very sensitive when he looked at me, for I imagined that he would find a great difference between me and the

gay company he was in the habit of attending in the drawing-room.

When we had finished tea I went to the book-case and looked over some of the volumes there. The books made a well-selected library. They were nearly all by English authors, and included good editions of the poets, historians, dramatists, and theologians. There was also a collection of novels, and on a lower shelf were ranged a set of useful schoolbooks. From these, Laura told me, her governess had taught her. It was not my intention to trouble the child with questions about her studies that night, for it was already half-past eight, and she informed me that she usually went to bed at nine. When the tea things were removed I again took her upon my knee, and talked to her of my early life, hoping that she would be moved to take a warmer liking to me when she heard of the troubles I had gone through.

Whilst I was conversing with her in a low voice, looking tenderly into the young blue eyes she had fixed upon me, the door quietly opened, and a gentleman entered. No sooner did Laura see him than she slipped from my lap and sprang towards him, crying, "Papa!"

I instantly stood up, and received Mr. Merton's bow with a respectful curtsey, which was the obeisance in vogue in my early days. He kissed his child, and then stepping forward gave me his hand with a very frank, cordial gesture, and said he was happy to meet me.

"I am glad," he said, looking with a smiling face from me to his child, "to see you both on such good terms already. Pray be seated, Miss Malcolmson," and he took a chair facing mine. Laura went and stood by him. He put his arm round her neck, and fondled her cheek with his hand.

I was pleased with his appearance. He seemed to me not more than eight-and-thirty years of age. He was not at all handsome, but he had a look of kindness and homely genius in his face which atoned for the want of regular features. His eyes were deep-set, rather large, and brown. His brow was broad, low, and rugged, indicating, it seemed to me, strength of will and power of intellect. His face was without hair; it wanted the relief of whiskers, for his cheeks presented a very rugged outline when his face was fully turned towards you, and, from the fact of his hair being rather [redacted]ed at the sides,

the ears were made too prominent. There was no expression of sternness or severity in his face at all; but neither were there signs wanting, either in the firmness of his mouth, or in the resolute gaze of his eyes, or in the muscular breadth of his chest, or in the upright way he held his massive head, of great energy of character, and a capacity of indomitable resolution. He was dressed for company in the high-collared, swallow-tailed coat, with gilt buttons, long satin waistcoat, and ample neckcloth of that period. He wore black silk stockings, and black cloth small-clothes, and shoes furnished with tiny gold buckles. He had but one ring on his hand, and that was a signet-ring on the middle finger of his left hand, whereof the stone was so large that it extended from the knuckle to the first joint.

"I sincerely hope," he said very blandly, "that you and Laura will get on together well. Mrs. Merton has shown judgment in selecting so young a lady as yourself. You are pretty sure to have more sympathies with your young charge than were you her senior by double the number of your years as your predecessor was."

"I fancy that I am still young enough to

make a playmate for Miss Laura, sir," I answered, smiling.

"You ought to be a child at heart," he said, inspecting me critically but kindly. "You don't look more than seventeen."

"I am eighteen."

"I trust you will find this place suit you. At all events I may promise that you will not be subjected to much interference." He sighed a little as he said this, and looked at Laura. "My wife told you, I think," he went on, "that it was more for your society than for your accomplishments that we wanted you for Laura. Mrs. Merton seems to find but little time to give to her child. There are but few children in the neighbourhood whom Laura can make playmates of, and in consequence, she lives a great deal more to herself than so young a child should. I shall look to you, Miss Malcolmson, to keep her childhood fresh in her, to encourage and assist her in any innocent pleasures she may have a mind to. An only child labours under a serious disadvantage in having no companions of her own years to constantly associate with. She risks the loss of her youthfulness. It is a sad loss to a child when that goes from her. To my mind the

flower is dead that has lost its perfume. Ay, it is a heavy bereavement to older people, too, to loose their youthfulness. Let us always strive to keep our hearts young while we can."

His semi-speculative language, half-sad, half-sceptical, was much to my taste, and was just the sort of tone I could love to adopt in conversation. I was hardly intimate enough yet to talk with him, though his words had been a direct challenge to my fondness of discussion. He looked at the clock and said,

"We are entertaining a few friends this evening, Miss Malcolmson, or I should beg you to join us with Laura in the drawing-room. But it would be unfair to ask you to take the trouble of changing your dress after so fatiguing a day as this must have been to you."

"I am much obliged to you for your consideration, sir."

I stopped at this, though I was nearly adding that it would be useless to ask me to the drawing-room, as I had no dress fit to appear in.

After sitting a little he rose, and giving me his hand wished me good-night. He took

Laura in his arms, and fondled and kissed her some moments before setting her down.

"God bless you, little pet lamb," I heard him say to her softly, and then he left the room.

I remained talking to Laura a short time after he was gone; but while the clock was striking nine Mrs. Saunders came in. She brought a small tray containing wine, biscuits, and sandwiches, with her, which she placed upon the table.

"I will help you if you like," said she, "to put Miss Laura to bed."

"I shall be glad of your assistance," I answered, and turning to Laura asked her if she cared to go to bed yet.

"Oh, yes, it is time!" exclaimed Mrs. Saunders; "Mrs. Merton is very particular, and likes Miss Laura to be punctual."

This being so, I took a bedroom candle, which the footman had left upon a side-table, and lighted it. When we entered the passage I found that it was illuminated by two lamps, one at each end. We gained the bedroom, and Laura began to undress. I was pleased to see before she got into bed that she knelt down and said her prayers. She made a pretty and moving picture in her little night-

gown, with her gold-coloured hair streaming down her back, her little hands clasped, her lips whispering, and her eyes reverentially fixed upwards. Mrs. Saunders was busy in arranging my bed in the next room. I kissed Laura, when her head was laid on the pillow, and asked who had taught her to pray. She answered, "Papa." I had instinctively felt that this was the case, and had only asked to be sure.

"I will sit with you if you like, dear, until you fall asleep," I said, for I thought that so little a girl would be afraid to lie awake by herself in this lonely part of the house.

"I shall not be afraid if you will leave the door open," she answered. "Will you be coming to bed soon?"

"Very soon."

She smiled. I left the candle burning in her room, and returned to my sitting-room, followed by Mrs. Saunders.

On entering I fancied I heard the sounds of music. I went to the window and opened it, and then I caught the tones of a woman's voice singing. Mrs. Saunders came to my side and said,

"That is Mrs. Merton; she sings beautifully. The windows of the drawing-room

are open; that is the reason you can hear her so plainly."

I listened, and heard a rich soprano, thrilling and melting upon the air, accompanied by the soft tones of a harp. The night was dark, though the calm deep skies were thickly strewn with stars. There was a profound stillness in the air, which the sweet voice singing served rather to heighten than vex. There was also a sub-tone—a murmurous under-voice—which left the silence still complete, though itself was quite audible. It bore the same reference to the stillness that a spirit might bear to the scene in which it appeared; it would be transparent; you could see through it; it would not obstruct the view, though it presented a material object to the eye. So this mysterious undertone seemed to live in the stillness without affecting it.

"What is that sound?" I asked.

"What sound?"

"Do you not hear a peculiar moaning like far-off thunder?"

"Oh, that is the sea."

I closed the window, and Mrs. Saunders asked me to take a glass of wine and a sandwich. I did so, taking care to fill a glass for her.

"I think," said she, in a friendly chatty way, "that you will find your bedroom comfortable. Indeed, I hope that you will find yourself comfortable altogether here, and that you will stop with us. I have often been sorry for Miss Laura. She wants a playmate sadly at times. You'll be a nice companion."

"Mrs. Merton is fond of gaiety, you told me?"

"Oh, yes. She and master don't lead a very happy life I imagine. But I say nothing. It's not always wise to see things—leastways to talk of them."

"Mr. Merton seems a very kind man. He was here just now, and pleased me very much by his manners."

"I don't doubt you'll like him. But you'll find it harder to get on with Mrs. Merton. It is a wonder to me that I have been so long here as I have. Mrs. Merton seldom keeps a servant longer than six months."

"I am sorry to hear that. Now that I am here I could wish to remain."

"She will be different with you, I daresay. I am speaking of servants and housekeepers like me. You see, Mrs. Merton and I are brought a good deal together, and if I didn't

know how to keep my temper, I must have left her a fortnight after I arrived. She is dreadfully short and snappish in the way she speaks to those who wait upon her, as if servants were less than the dirt under her feet. Yet I don't know that she has any call to be so proud. They say she was only a plain country squire's daughter, with no money. All the fortune is Mr. Merton's."

"She was sufficiently amiable when I met her downstairs."

"She can be amiable enough if she likes. It's just because she is so uncertain, that she is so trying. You never know whether you've got her by the head or the feet. One moment she's as soft and nice-spoken as you could wish any lady to be; but if you happen to say the least thing to displease her, no matter how trifling, her eyes will flash and she'll turn upon you as if she meant to tear you to pieces."

"Well, fortunately for me, I shan't have much to do with her."

"For the matter of that you may get on with her; there's no telling. She takes her likes and dislikes, though you'll be sure to have your temper tried by her, even if she should take a fancy to you. I wouldn't con-

tradict her, miss, if I were you ; and she likes to be flattered."

"I don't think I can flatter very well," I answered, laughing ; "but I am pretty sure I shall manage to talk to her without contradicting. Will you not take another glass of wine, Mrs. Saunders? I am much obliged to you for your attention in bringing me this refreshment."

"No more wine, thank you, miss." And then getting up, she added, "I mustn't keep you from going to bed any longer. What time would you like to be called in the morning?"

"Will half-past seven be too late?"

"It would be too early. We are not very early here. Mistress is never up before twelve, and sometimes one, and she takes a long time dressing. Shall I say half-past eight?"

I told her that I thought eight o'clock would be late enough, on which she bade me good-night, and went away.

I did not feel very sleepy. The excitement of novelty was sufficiently strong to keep me awake. But I fancied Laura might be wishing for me, so I went to my bedroom. I peeped in at her and found her fast asleep,

her hair quite veiling her face, and her little arm extended along the coverlet. She looked a perfect picture of innocence and child-like beauty, and I could not help parting the hair from her forehead and gently kissing her. I judged that Mrs. Merton must be frivolous, vain, and shallow indeed, not to love this little child, for she looked a sweet creature in her sleep, just such a bairnie as a mother's heart would fold up. Nay, Mrs. Merton must be worse than the words I have written imply, for there is no reason why a vain and shallow mother should not love her own flesh and blood.

When I put out the light the room was pitch dark, for the window-curtains were close-drawn, and the night outside was black enough. In the intense gloom it was quite impossible for me to realise that I was no longer at my aunt's but at Ashleigh Manor, earning my own bread, mistress of two handsome rooms, with a charming little child for a companion, and with the most elegant servants to wait upon me! Indeed, there was a great air of unreality about everything, to my unaccustomed thoughts. The ancient house with its curious passages and chambers, my rooms separated as completely from the

wing inhabited by Mr. and Mrs. Merton, as if we lived in two distinct dwellings, created in my mind an idea of distance and dim seclusion which was puzzling to think of. It seemed very strange to be lying in this large dark room, accessible only by means of a complication of passages and apartments, all around buried in a deep and profound stillness impenetrable and oppressive as the darkness, and yet to be sensible that in the same house were spacious rooms brilliantly lighted, gay and living with the fragrance of flowers, the laughter of guests, the voices of singers. Yet I was very well pleased with the change in my affairs. I had no pleasant memories to make me regret my severance from old ties; no recollection of loving friends separated from me. I was completely alone in the world, and my first entrance upon the stage of the spacious amphitheatre of life appeared to me triumphant and even brilliant. I determined to do my best to win Mrs. Merton's esteem, capricious as she might be, and to spare no pains with her daughter to prove my eagerness to please, and to fulfil the promises I had made. And thus thinking myself into a grateful and happy mood, I fell asleep.

CHAPTER IV.

THE LEGEND OF THE ANGELS' COURT.

I WAS awakened by a servant knocking at my door and telling me it was eight o'clock. I rose at once and went to look at Laura. She sat up in her bed when she saw me, and held up a doll, calling to me to kiss baby.

"Why, where does baby come from?" said I. "I didn't see her here last night."

"Papa brought her to me after you left the room with Mrs. Saunders. Poor dolly! I am afraid she is smothered. I found her at the foot of the bed when I awoke, under the clothes."

"She must have been sliding that way when I looked at you, for I did not see her."

I was much struck with this instance of the father's thoughtfulness for his child.

"Shall I dress you now, or will you wait until I am dressed?" I asked.

"Oh, I can dress myself, thanks!" she exclaimed, springing gracefully out of bed. She looked as white as a little snow-maiden. She had exquisitely small feet, pink-tinted at the toes, and she stepped so lightly upon them that she might have danced along a row of lilies without bending their white heads on their stems.

I left her to perform her toilet, and went to attend to my own. And now, as I am standing before the looking-glass, the reflection hints to me that this is a good opportunity to describe myself. I must do so sooner or later, and had therefore better not defer it. I am too old a woman to fear the charge of vanity. One surely may talk of one's youth as one talks of the dead. Let me make haste then to set down the truth at once, and affirm that I was very pretty. I do not say that mine was a kind of face that everybody would admire. Among my own sex it found most favour. But I am pleased to remember that it was admired by those gentlemen whose good opinion I should most wish to have won. I had dark brown hair, and plenty of it, and large brown eyes, soft and pensive in

their expression, which was quite natural, for I had gone through sorrow enough to make me melancholy and thoughtful. But it was not so much my small mouth, and my teeth, and my little Roman nose, and my clear complexion: it was the youthfulness and good nature of my expression which gave pleasure to those who looked at me. My features were cast in a cheerful mould, and their cheerfulness was made piquant by reason of its being mocked by the pensiveness of my eyes.

Let me defy those scruples of egotism which embarrass me, and be minute. I played a notable part in the drama I am writing, and the leading personage of a play should always be clearly and sharply represented to your mind's eye, or much of the interest will pass out of the story. I doubt if mere outside is the trifling matter that Goldsmith makes Dr. Primrose call it. The mind is often influenced by the face to a wonderful degree. How saucy and arrogant beauty makes some women, who, had they been born plain, though possessed of the same minds, might have proved very amiable, agreeable ladies! My face did not affect my character, because up to the time when my

cousin Henry had fallen in love with me, it had not attracted the least notice that I was aware of. But I do not say for a moment that had I been petted and caressed for my face I should not have been spoilt by it, that I should not have become as insupportable in my behaviour as too many handsome girls unfortunately are.

As to my figure, it was well-shaped and supple. I was of the medium height, and walked with a rather graceful carriage, which I inherited from my mother, who had it in perfection. My attire was necessarily of the simplest kind. The fashion of that day I prefer to any other that has been the mode since. What, after all, is more elegant than the girdle just under the breast, the short sleeves, the skirt reaching to the ankle (though trains were equally fashionable), the nodding feathers adorning the head, the white tuckers, the pantalettes, and the airy pumps? What do I see pass my window as I write this? A scarecrow, surely! A figure bent nearly double, wearing a small pancake of a hat, from under which bulges out a huge mass of padding and false hair; tall heels, which make the woman walk as though she had knock-knees; a dress dragged tightly in

front, and swept into an ugly bunch behind! Can that woman be Milly Palmer, who is but seventeen years old, or is it her grandmother run mad? She walks as if she were ninety, and yet she carries a youthful face, bloodless indeed, though she could mend that if she would but cut her stay-laces. And this is the modern fashion! I protest I had rather be ridiculed for wearing the costume of my great-grandmother than admired for a mode which would have thrown the last generation into hysterics to see.

Laura's toilet was a very brief business. At the age of ten we find little vanity in the looking-glass. She came to my room and watched me dressing, and asked a great number of questions in true child fashion. I was glad to find her so thoroughly a child. I had feared from the grave look that had come into her face when her mother had spoken to her on the previous evening, that I should find her mind languid with the unhealthy maturity which is the usual result in children who are thrown too much with their elders.

The sitting-room, when we entered it, was bright and warm with the early summer sun. It seemed a most delightful room. I threw

open the windows, and in streamed the radiant morning air, sweet and busy with the smell of flowers, and the hum of insects. I rang for breakfast, and when we had finished the meal I asked Laura to tell me the routine she had followed with the former governess. It was simple enough. She studied until twelve, and then walked out and returned for dinner at two. She read with her governess until half-past three, when her music mistress came, who engaged her until after four. After that hour she amused herself as she best could until bed-time.

I thought the routine a good one, and resolved to adopt it. So gathering from the child the nature of her tasks we took our seats at the table and set to work. I found her very intelligent, and much more advanced than I should have suspected. It was plain that her last governess had known her business.

My professional duties play too humble a part in this memoir to occupy your attention; and I will therefore spare you any further account of them. It will be sufficient to say that at this first sitting I discovered Laura to be a most obedient, anxious pupil, and I remember putting the books away with the

feeling that if she only persevered as she had begun, she would hardly fail to securely establish my position at Ashleigh Manor.

I kissed her affectionately and gratefully.

"You are a dear, good child!" I exclaimed, in the fulness of my heart. "Your application and attention give me great encouragement. I am quite sure that we shall get on capitally together."

She seemed very pleased, and running to the window, said,

"Shall we go out now, Miss Malcolmson?"

"Yes," said I; "you shall show me the grounds, and if we are not too tired we will go and have a look at the sea. I have never seen it yet."

But just as we were leaving the room to put on our hats, in walked Mr. Merton.

"Good morning, Miss Malcolmson, I hope you found your bedroom comfortable. Well, Lorry," kissing her, "have you done with your lessons?"

"Yes, papa, we were just going for a walk."

"Miss Laura is very dutiful and good, sir," I said. "She has pleased me very much by the way she did her lessons this morning."

"You and she will get on. I see it plainly enough. But don't let me keep you. Go and get on your things. The morning is beautiful, and you will both enjoy the air."

He waited for us until we were ready, and then accompanied us downstairs. His manners were very cordial and easy. He seemed to take great delight in the society of his little one. It was as though he liked to have her near him, that her purity might shield him from the trouble or anxiety that in moments of repose threw a kind of shadow upon his face. Nor was my conjecture inaccurate, as I afterwards learnt.

Whilst we passed through the room on our way to the west wing, the hall-door of which he told me to use in preference to the door of what, to distinguish it, I must henceforth call the "old house," he talked to me about Ashleigh Manor. He told me that his father had had a serious mind to throw down the rooms which were grouped around the old house door, and erect a large hall in their place, so that there should be an entrance to the building in keeping with the size of it. But he had been dissuaded from doing so by many friends, who had declared that the ancient and primitive beauty of the structure

would be irreparably injured by any modernisations.

"I agree with my father's advisers in a great measure," he said, "though I also think that convenience in a man's dwelling deserves to be as much studied as effect. I myself have often been tempted to pull the interior down and build a handsome hall arched in the Gothic style, with noble pillars and windows. The effect would be striking, and no doubt the architect would contrive to design the hall in exact harmony with the exterior of the building. But, somehow, I have always had a reluctance to be the first to lay hands on these venerable bricks. My ancestors seem one and all to have been influenced by the same superstition of what I must call abstinence, and in lieu of meddling with the founder's handiwork have satisfied themselves with adding wings to the house. However, there is no doubt that all these rooms are very much in the way. I shall recommend the future mistress of Ashleigh Manor," he said, passing his arm around Laura's neck, "to make the improvement I am too superstitious to begin."

He halted in the old oak gallery, overhanging the dim court with its faded pavement.

"Are you superstitious, Miss Malcolmson?"

"I don't think so, sir."

"Then should you ever meet a certain ghost, that is said to walk here, perhaps you will have the kindness to exorcise it."

I laughed, and answered that I did not believe in ghosts.

"Nor I. But I have had servants who have sworn, with knocking knees and white faces, that they have seen a sheeted shade stalk, or glide rather, like Hamlet père, along that stone floor, and melt into the solid masonry of the wall. Of course we all know that ghosts have no difficulty in passing through brick and mortar. The truth is, there is a doleful and lamentable legend connected with this spot, which is called for some reason, doubtless known to its sponsor, the Angels' Court. No longer than sixty years since—in my grandfather's time—there came to live in this house a very beautiful young lady, named Maud Assheton. She was a relative of my grandfather, and a Roman Catholic: but her religion has nothing to do with my story. Are you listening, Lorry? Your eyes are wide open. Don't be scared, my pet. There are never

any ghosts where papa is. Well, Miss Malcolmson, my grandfather was a very hospitable old gentleman, fond of collecting crowds of men about him, and plying them with port, of which his cellars were filled with the gradually-decaying magnums. Two young men among my grandfather's gay company fell in love with Maud. They were both of them fellows of good antecedents, and heirs to considerable fortunes. Naturally, poor Maud couldn't love them both. She gave her heart to Mr. Sackville, who had no pretensions to the other's good looks; but it was supposed that Maud inclined to him because he was a Roman Catholic. Our disappointed friend, whom we will call Mr. Damer, I forget his real name, appeared to endure his reverse with great good humour, and carried his philosophical indifference so far as to pledge in terms cordial enough to make the company loudly clap his *bonhomie* and eloquence, the health of the young lovers at a dinner, given by my grandfather, on the evening of a ball. That ball was at its height, the music was at its loudest, the dancing at its merriest, when Mr. Damer and Maud were missed. The absence of his beloved was first noticed by Mr. Sackville.

Time was given them to return, for it was supposed that they had left the room separately, and that one or the other would shortly re-enter it. Half-an-hour passed, and then Mr. Sackville begged my grandfather's permission to make a search for his betrothed. They went out without saying a word to their guests, and my grandfather, taking a candle, came along the corridor we have just passed, looking into all the rooms as he went through them. Can't you conceive Mr. Sackville's feelings, Miss Malcolmson? No doubt the poor young man was racked with jealousy, and shuddered as he peered about him, lest he should suddenly stumble upon his *affiancée* conducting a well-bred flirtation with his good-humoured rival in one of the quiet chambers. At last they reached this gallery, and looking over it as we do now, the first object they beheld was the figure of Maud prostrate on the stones there. There was a staircase leading into the court from this gallery in those days, and down it rushed Mr. Sackville, followed by my grandfather. They raised the poor young lady, and found her quite dead, barbarously stabbed in the throat, whilst the floor was black with her blood. If the light were stronger you

could see the stain in that corner yonder, to the left. Blood is a wonderful dye. It takes Eternity to obliterate its terrible sign."

I strained my eyes and fancied I saw the mark he indicated. But imagination can see anything you choose.

"Of course Maud Assheton was murdered by Mr. Damer?"

"No doubt. She certainly had not killed herself, for no weapon lay near her."

"And what became of her murderer?" I asked, much interested, for the gloom of the place heightened fancy, and I easily realised the full horror of the crime.

"He went abroad and died by his own hand. You observe, the servants have a good excuse for now and then seeing a ghost."

"Come along, Lorry," he said, "let us get into the sunlight. We shall turn gray as spectres if we inhabit this gloom much longer."

"And was Mr. Sackville very sorry because poor Maud was killed?" asked Laura, as we left the court and made our way to the hall.

"Very sorry indeed," answered Mr. Merton, gravely. "He mourned her for a whole

year—for a long long twelvemonth—and then married a lady of title."

Laura seemed satisfied. I daresay she thought twelve months a very long time to mourn.

"Would not Mrs. Merton like to see us before we went out, sir?" I inquired.

"I don't think she is up yet," he answered. "Good-bye, Lorry, and don't chase the butterflies. Pretty things were made for our delight, not for us to pain."

And kissing his hand, he opened a door and disappeared.

I had noticed, whilst we stood talking, that there was a range of doors along the gallery. This gallery projected widely over the hall, and the rails that protected it were richly carved, and made of some dark-coloured wood. I asked Laura whose rooms those doors belonged to, and she told me they were bedrooms. The centre one was her mother's; the next, Mr. Merton's; the others were spare chambers. I further gathered from her that those rooms stretched backwards in suites, and that some of them communicated by doors with the old house. The more I saw of Ashleigh Manor the more was I amazed by its prodigality of space. It is

not too much to say that the west wing alone was the size of what would be considered a large house. In the hall, facing the drawing-room, was the dining-room; behind it, the library; behind the drawing-room, an anteroom. There was a glass door corresponding in shape and colours with the large window, which led into the conservatories. It was these conservatories which half-circled the drawing-room.

"You are a lucky young lady," I thought, looking at Laura, as we left the house, "to be the inheritor of this noble property. I don't doubt that when you come to years of discretion you will find it hard to suit yourself with a husband."

The morning air was rich and sweet, fragrant with the perfume of the garden, and cool with the salt breath of the sea. We were in midsummer. The trees were luxuriant with deep green foliage; the flowers had reached their maturity, and were languid with excess of sweetness. I observed a wide avenue curving round under the trees, where it met the primitive approach to the house. The sward was dark and soft, like a velvet carpet; we strolled slowly among rich parterres of flowers, past fountains babbling their

eternal songs, and making the air cool with the freshness of their music. I seemed to have been suddenly transported into fairyland. There appeared no limits to this wonderful scene of flowers, of finely-gravelled walks, of evergreens clipt into pyramids and other fantastic shapes, after the old-fashioned school of gardening, of hedges breathing incense sweet as hawthorn. Over all stretched an element deep and beautiful, its rich blue made tender by delicate wreaths of white cloud, which melted upon the azure even as I watched them. When at last we reached the confines of the flower-gardens, my eye was delighted with fields swelling with the yellowing green of crops — verdant seas deep-breathing to the transparent kisses of the soft west wind.

I had talked of visiting the sea; but before we had half-measured the length of the estate I was too weary to push the excursion beyond its boundaries. I noticed that there was not a spark of pride in the way in which Laura showed me over the grounds. She was naïvely delighted by my delight—that was all. Clearly here was a child who had not been tormented and corrupted by incessant remarks on the splendour of the paternal

possessions and the dignities she was to inherit. She took me to the stables and the farmyard, where I found a wonderful collection of animals and fowls; cows and pigs and hens of many breeds, turkeys, pigeons, ducks, and I know not what else besides. I was thoroughly tired out by the time we reached the house, and heartily glad to rest myself in the cool and calm of the Red Room.

Whilst the cloth was being laid for dinner, a very genteel-looking girl entered the room, and told Laura that her mamma wished to see her. I examined the girl curiously, for besides being pretty, she was dressed in such a way as to make me wonder what post she filled in the house. Indeed, she looked so thoroughly respectable and even ladylike that had she been introduced as a relative of the Mertons, I should not have been surprised. She was dressed in black. Her hair was very neatly braided, and becomingly dressed behind. Her hands were white, and exhibited no signs of rude work. She had bowed to me with a quiet, respectful air before addressing Laura, and I had returned her salutation, quite at a loss to define her position.

Laura went out with her, and when they were gone I asked the footman who the young lady was.

"Oh, that's Wakefield, miss. Jane Wakefield her name is. She's mistress's maid."

Lady's maid! She certainly looked superior to her post. I had found something singularly pleasing and interesting in the calm and softness of her gray eyes. Laura was not long absent. When she returned, I asked her how Mrs. Merton was.

"She is very cross," she answered. "She hardly kissed me. She was sitting with her hair down, and was angry because I did not come sooner."

"What did she want?"

"Nothing. She only wished to see me. When Mrs. Joliffe" (naming her last governess) "was here, mamma used sometimes to send for me, but not often. Papa likes her to send for me. When I am fetched, I know they have quarrelled."

"How?"

"Papa often tells her that she doesn't love me. He tells her this when he is angry. Sometimes, when they did not know I was near, I have heard papa speak to her angrily about me; she has answered him very angrily

too; but when he has left the room she has rung the bell and told Wakefield to bring me to her. So I guess that whenever Wakefield comes for me, papa and mamma have quarrelled."

"Do they often quarrel?"

"Oh yes. It is not papa's fault. Mamma is often cross, and says things which puts papa in a passion."

"But what do they quarrel about?" I asked, hoping by my questions to extract such information from the little girl as would enable me to deal more competently with Mrs. Merton when I met her.

"I don't know, Miss Malcolmson. About lots of things. I often cry when I remember the cross things mamma says to papa. He is a dear papa, and mamma is wicked to vex him."

"Do they ever quarrel before you?"

"Oh yes; mamma does not care what she says. She quarrels before company."

The entrance of the footman put an end to my interrogation. Laura's answers made me feel very uneasy. The more I heard of Mrs. Merton, the more disagreeable her character appeared. I was afraid that I should have a hard job to get on with her.

During dinner, I spoke to Laura about Wakefield, the lady's maid.

"She seems a very nice person," I said. "Do you like her?"

"Yes, rather. We don't speak much. Mamma won't let me talk to the servants."

"Has she been here long?"

"I don't know. Not very long."

"Does she get on with your mamma?"

"No. Mamma often speaks fearfully cross to her. Once when I was in the room, I saw Wakefield crying while she was doing mamma's hair. She has no father and mother Mrs. Saunders says. I often feel sorry for her."

The little thing looked at me very pensively. I was struck by the contrast her gravity offered to her infantine face. The thought of her mother was evidently a sorrow.

"I dare say," said I, "that your mamma has many things to vex her of which you know nothing. You must learn to make all the excuses you can for her. We can never have more than one mother, dear; and we should always think of her with tenderness and loving pity if she has her failings, never with anger."

"I would love her if she loved papa."

"But why do you think she does not love your papa? It is no sign of a want of love to be in a bad temper sometimes."

She had evidently very clear conceptions in her mind which convinced her that Mrs. Merton did not love her husband; but she had no words with which to express herself. I saw that she was casting about for terms to convey her thoughts. These being denied her, she remained silent for some time, and then said,

"Mamma would not love Captain Fowler if she loved papa."

"Hush!" I exclaimed, "you must not say such things."

I felt positively frightened, and swept the room with alarmed eyes, much wondering at the same time how such a thought should have come into her little head.

"It is true!" she answered, vehemently. "Papa told her so one day, and she laughed at him and answered, 'At all events I don't love *you*.'"

"Were you present when she said this?"

"Yes," she replied; "papa made no answer, but came and took me by the hand and led me out of the room. He sat down

on one of the chairs in the hall, and placed me between his knees and kissed me, and whispered to himself. He was crying—he *was*, Miss Malcolmson—because my cheek was wet after he had put his face against mine. Oh, I hated mamma when I saw papa crying!"

The little fragile creature went into a perfect fury. She flung the fork down upon her plate; her face was quite red; and suddenly jumping up she ran to a corner of the room, and sobbed and wept piteously with her face turned to the wall.

I caught her up and sat down with her, held her in my arms, and kissed and soothed her as best I could. I did not want the servant to see the child crying, lest the news might reach the drawing-room, and I should be questioned. Yet there was something too generous in her passion to make me regard it as a doubtful illustration of character. I was shocked, indeed, at so young a child having such feelings towards her mother; but it was the mother with whom I really felt indignant for exciting such hostility in her daughter.

I succeeded in pacifying her after a little,

and took care not to chide her for her outburst, lest a recurrence to the subject should excite her anew, and talked to her on other matters; and by the time the footman came to clear away, she was as chatty and lively as she had been during the morning.

The afternoon passed quietly and quickly, and at half-past three Laura went downstairs to her music-mistress. Left alone, I could not help musing over the conversation I had had with the child. But I was resolved not to suffer any foregone conclusions to prejudice me against Mrs. Merton. I was not to know but that her bad temper was due to causes of which no one but her husband could, by any possibility, be aware. How could I tell, for instance, but that under his easy, affable manner he hid a most tyrannical nature? I had often read that men are, for the most part, surprising impostors, and that the most doubtful premiss in the world to draw an inference from is a husband's behaviour to his wife before others. I resolved, therefore, to wait a little, and take such opportunities of inspection as offered, before making up my mind that Mrs. Merton was vicious in her temper, selfish and frivolous from no other

cause than such as was to be sought in her heart. Wives often avenge the bad treatment they receive from their husbands by violently changing their characters, and acting parts which they would have shuddered to impersonate in the days of their freedom. Most certain it is that in ninety cases out of every hundred, it is the husband's fault when a wife fails in the duty she owes him. If, when people hear their friends speaking of so and so as a bad wife, they would only inquire what sort of a man the husband is, a hundred excuses would crowd to offer themselves for the woman, and her worst faults would be charged to the man. But somehow, when we talk of a bad wife, we rarely think of the husband. While men can invent a thousand apologies for their worst actions, they can never find a single extenuating circumstance in the evil career of a woman. They are for having her out, and stoning her on the spot. He who deceived her has his apologies made for him; he sneaks snugly off, and leaves his weaker partner to bear all the crushing missiles of the world's hate and scorn and rage. This is all commonplace, to be sure; very trite, worn, and old. So much the

better. People who fight for a truth need not mind how ancient the colours may be under which they battle. Here is a very good truth; and if it has been a long time current, its longevity only proves that the metal is very pure and good; and so I beg you pocket it.

CHAPTER V.

IN THE DRAWING-ROOM.

VERY shortly after tea, Mrs. Saunders came to my room. This was the first time I had seen her that day. I asked her to sit down, but she declined. I think she would have sat had Laura not been present; for she was plainly a chatty, confidential woman, who loved a gossip.

She had only looked in, she told me, to say that Mrs. Merton expected Miss Laura and me in the drawing-room at half-past seven. Had the summons not come, I don't think that I should have ventured down stairs, though I had been given to understand by Mrs. Merton herself that a visit to the drawing-room during the evening was a portion of my duties. The truth was, my wardrobe was so meagre that I was ashamed to make my

appearance in the gilded saloon in which Mrs. Merton sat in royal state.

There was no help for it, however; go I must. So when seven o'clock struck, I went to my bedroom to prepare for my visit. I turned over my few dresses very dolefully, and after as long a consideration as would occupy the mind of a young lady in the showroom of a fashionable dressmaker, I chose a black silk, a new one cut out by my aunt and made by myself. This, with a plain gold brooch, and a black velvet bow at the side of my hair, formed my attire.

I joined Laura, and half-past seven having struck, we took hand in hand our solitary way through the passages and vacant, chill chambers, and reached the drawing-room.

The curtains were drawn, and the room was lighted up, though the sky outside was still flushed with the hot, blood-red sunset. In the soft brilliance of lamp and candle, reflected in polished mirrors and gleaming sconces, the drawing-room looked wonderfully rich and beautiful. The air was heavy, almost to oppression, with the sweet breath of the flowers in the conservatory. I might catalogue the furniture with the accuracy of an auctioneer; but the list would fail to con-

vey to you the forcible suggestions of splendour, wealth, and refinement with which the large room was full fraught. There was a profusion of gilt and colour; but there was no degeneration into gaudiness. Antique and modern taste were curiously and felicitously blended. The broad marble mantelpiece seemed in keeping with the noble Louis Quatorze clock, with its astonishing emblems and curiously-wrought dial-plate; the sconces had probably mirrored the besatined figures of the Sir Plumes and Sir Foplings of the age of the first George; yet they strictly harmonised with the singularly beautiful modern tables of walnut which were grouped, laden with a hundred costly knick-knacks, about the room. Whether this combination of the best tastes of an old with the best tastes of a new school of art were fortuitous or designed, the effect was peculiarly elegant and splendid. Considered with reference to the dull and sparely-furnished chambers in the old house, this drawing-room seemed an almost Epicurean device: it would appear as if the swart and sullen rooms had been suffered to remain, that they might heighten, by conducting you to it, the festal beauty of this brilliant apartment.

Mrs. Merton bowed to me, coldly enough I thought, from a sofa as we entered. She was dressed in green silk—but it was not the green silk of yesterday; for this dress was flounced with black lace. Green was evidently her favourite colour. Did it symbolise the freshness of her heart?

She looked, I thought, rather faded and pale. She had been reading. She now placed the volume on a stool, reclining indolently back after giving her daughter a nod.

"Take that chair—near the table, Miss Malcolmson," she said, casting her eyes over my dress more critically, I thought, than good taste permitted. "Where will you sit, Laura? by Miss Malcolmson? That's right. But do not stand, child. It is so fatiguing to the eye to see people always on their legs."

It was odd to hear her include her child in the category of "people." I pulled a chair near me for Laura, and she seated herself. I felt nervous and embarrassed, which told rather heavily against Mrs. Merton's behaviour. Is it not a sign of good breeding to set those you are with completely at their ease? Before I left my room, I had had half a mind to bring some work with me; and

I was no sooner seated than I felt sorry I had not done so. The question that had deterred me was, would Mrs. Merton relish a work-box or a pair of knitting-needles introduced into her drawing-room?

"Pray, Miss Malcolmson," said Mrs. Merton, in a rather affected voice, "how do you get on with Lorry?"

"Very well indeed, madam. I do not think any governess ever had a more dutiful and lovable pupil."

"I am glad to hear it," she said. But my compliment to her child did not appear to cause her any real gratification. She took up her book; then, as though she remembered my presence, she closed it again upon her lap in so suggestive a way, that I longed to exclaim, "My dear madam, I do entreat that you will not mind me. The less I am minded by you, indeed, the more comfortable shall I be." Very listlessly she proceeded to put some commonplace inquiries to me concerning Laura's studies. I answered her as best I could; but it was plain that she was going through a very tedious form to her, and that she barely herself understood the nature of the questions she asked.

I inspected her as critically as I dared, and

before I had been in her company ten minutes, became convinced that of all the vain women here was the vainest that ever took fan in hand. Her language was not half so expressive of this radical defect as her manners, and the airs she gave herself. Some people might have thought her very handsome; I confess I did not. She was too dark to suit my taste. There was something I must call serpentine, for want of another word to convey the notion, in her small head and sparkling eyes, and in the supple and lengthy sweep of her form. I did not like the suggestion. It was brimful of malice and even malignity. She appeared, in short, just good looking enough to account for her prodigious self-conceit.

I found the resolution I had formed to suspend my judgment on her until I got to know her better, ebbing rapidly. There was not a glance, not a movement, not even a remark of hers that did not drive into deeper soil the prejudice that had already been planted by what Laura had told me about her.

I got upon safe ground after her languid questions about Laura had been answered, by telling her, "I had the pleasure of hearing her sing last night."

"Indeed!" cried she, brightening up; "where were you?"

"At my window. I heard the sounds of music through the closed casement, and opened it to listen."

"Could you hear my voice all that distance?" she asked, with quite a fluttering of pleasure.

"Very clearly."

"They tell me," she said, sinking back upon her cushion, "that I have a good voice. But I don't know whether I have or not."

She did know, better than anybody could tell her. But she was fishing for praise, and I thought she would not like to angle in vain.

"Your tones, heard in the night, were singularly sweet and melodious," which was true. I continued, with a smile, "They harmonised exquisitely with the starlight and the stillness."

"Smoothing the raven plume of darkness till it smiled. Is that what you mean, Miss Malcolmson?" said a voice behind me.

I turned and saw Mr. Merton. He had been lounging in the conservatory; but whether he had heard our conversation or not I could not guess. I saw his wife look

at him impatiently, as if vexed by his intrusion at that moment.

"If," said she, "you do not admire my voice, there is no reason why you should turn it into ridicule. At all events, there are a great many who have complimented me on it."

"I admire your voice very much," he answered, taking Laura from her chair, and seating her on his knee. "I was only topping Miss Malcolmson's poetical praise with a trite quotation from Milton."

"Do you prefer the harp as an accompaniment to the piano?" I asked, anxious to avert the quarrel which shone prophetic in her eyes.

"The harp suits my voice best," she replied.

"I should like Miss Malcolmson to hear you sing," said Mr. Merton, playing with his daughter's curls.

"Miss Malcolmson has heard me."

"Only from my sitting-room window, which is a long way off," I exclaimed.

"I will sing by-and-by," said she, coldly taking up her book.

"And when are you going to astonish us with *your* voice, Lorry?" inquired Mr. Merton, looking fondly into his little girl's face.

Hitherto Laura had sat quite silent, with

a subdued, half-frightened look up to the moment of her father's entrance.

"I don't know, papa; I don't care to sing."

"You must learn to sing some day. All pretty creatures sing, little birds and little children too. Now Miss Malcolmson sings, I dare say, beautifully."

"I do not, sir. I do not sing at all, I am sorry to say. But I am passionately fond of music."

"What sort of music do you like—German, Italian, Chinese, English?"

"I am too imperfectly educated to answer. I find English music very appealing and sweet."

"Your taste is mine, Miss Malcolmson. But you must know that people now-a-days dare not have a taste of their own. They surrender their judgment to the keeping of fashion, and allow that capricious goddess to dictate all their ideas to them. What can be more sweet and moving than English ballad music? But you would be reprobated as low and quite unfit for genteel society if you were to have the courage to avow a preference for 'Sally in our Alley' or 'Tom Bowling,' or some of the songs in 'Midas' and the 'Beg-

gar's Opera' to Signor Squallini's last song, or Herr Moses' new fantasia."

I could not help fancying that these remarks were more levelled at his wife than meant for me. At least I could see by the way she glanced at him over her book that his ideas were not hers; and I rather wondered at his caring to challenge her ill-temper by expressing such heretical views.

"Handel is called sublime," he continued, addressing me; "and I have no doubt he is sublime—I do not understand him. His music does not stir me *per se;* though the mighty mass of instruments which are usually assembled to thunder forth his ideas are very astonishing and even exhilarating. Will you think me vulgar if I say that I prefer one of Arne's or Purcell's quaint melodies to all Handel's prodigious noise? Mozart, they tell me, is a great genius. Mrs. Merton, for instance, thinks him a wonder. I heard 'Don Giovanni' last season in London, and all the time I was longing for the band to strike up some real tune, something that would linger on my ear. If music is not the expression of human feeling, it is nothing. So I reason that the composer who produces no melody that my soul can instantly seize

upon as an expression of subtle thought which, of itself, it could never utter, I say that that musician is no musician to me."

"You have no ear," said Mrs. Merton frigidly: "no ear and no taste."

"Perhaps not," he answered, looking with a rather hard smile at Laura. "But I think I have common sense,—a quality, to be sure, of which the ear is now independent, happily for fashion."

I was amazed to see Mrs. Merton sit suddenly upright, with a flushed face, and gesticulate as if she were in a passion.

"Is it not tormenting," she cried, appealing to me and speaking rapidly and even shrilly, "that I who make music my study should be insulted by such perverse and ridiculous opinions as Mr. Merton expresses? Would you believe that *any* man who acknowledges he knows nothing of music should take the liberty to cry up a parcel of ignorant, dull composers like most of our English writers, and declare them to be greater than the wonderful continental geniuses?"

"But why so warm?" said Mr. Merton coolly, while Laura pressed her cheek against his shoulder, looking at her mother with terrified eyes. "It is always a pity to lose one's temper over trifles."

"Lose one's temper! you are enough to madden an angel!" she retorted. "You only argue to vex me. I know that in your heart you don't care a fig more for your Arnes and Dibdins with their vulgar 'Wapping Old Stairs,' and rubbish, than you do for Mozart and Handel. It is the same with my singing. You pretend to praise it; but you are just the man to say behind my back that you would as soon hear a cow sing as me. That is how I am insulted, Miss Malcolmson! And Laura there sides with her papa and loves to see him make me angry."

I looked at Mr. Merton with a pale face. He returned my stare with an appreciable smile in his eyes. He did not appear to mind this exhibition of temper before me in the least. Perhaps, poor fellow, custom had made it a sort of second nature. Yet as he must have guessed that any further discussion would only inflame her rage, I was surprised that he should have persisted in it. What he next said was hardly calculated to appease her.

"You are quite in error if you think I compare you to a cow. I tell everybody before your face and behind your back that you sing like an angel. I will not say that my comparing you to an angel is not as

diverting to your friends as if I were to say that you had the voice of a cow. But that I cannot help. I only express my admiration by an old figure."

She looked from her husband to me, and kept her angry eyes fixed on my face for some moments to observe, probably, if I smiled at Mr. Merton's remark. But I was too pained and frightened to be sensible of any merriment just then. I was as much puzzled by Mr. Merton as I was by his wife. He had appeared to me a well-bred man; and I could not understand how it was that that sense of the fitness of things which is an essential condition of good breeding had not made him studious to avoid saying anything to irritate his wife before me and his child.

Looking at him—at his composed face upon which lay, just then, the shadow rather than the presence of a smile—it appeared to me as though his wife's rage actually pleased him. We all kept silent some moments during which Mrs. Merton resumed her book and fixed her eyes on the page, though her quivering nostrils and frowning brow told me that her passion was not yet spent, and that she was hardly in the mood to take in the meaning of the printed page.

I saw Mr. Merton looking attentively at Laura who sat upon his knee gazing sideways at her mother. He seemed lost in a deep reverie, and not an agreeable one either; but I gathered this more from his lips, which were tightly compressed, than from the expression of his face, which was placid enough.

Presently he raised his full eyes slowly and they met mine. Instantly he broke from his abstraction, though calmly; and looked at me so steadily and searchingly that I was for the time being fascinated and unable to withdraw my gaze. I accounted for this by remembering that I was speculating upon his character when I met his eyes, and my thoughts were, for the moment, so absorbing that some seconds passed before I was sensible that we were looking at each other. Yet when I grew conscious of the fact, so magnetic was the power of his dark, steadfast eyes that I remained, whilst he chose to regard me, perfectly passive under his inspection, watching him.

It was with a singular feeling of relief that I heard him say, "Lorry, play me a tune on the piano. Let me hear what progress you are making."

Ashamed of the steady gaze I had fixed

upon him, which he might consider bold and impertinent, I was glad to cover my confusion by rising and adjusting the music-stool for Laura. She came promptly to the piano, and began to play some simple tune. Her touch was feeble and tremulous; I think her mother's presence made her nervous. And indeed the poor child had reason to be nervous, for ere long I saw Mrs. Merton move uneasily on the sofa; she let fall her book impatiently and turned her head away.

Mr. Merton eyed her narrowly.

In a few moments she called out, "Pray cease, Laura; the noise is distracting, and my head aches."

Laura lifted her hands from the keys, and looked around.

"Go on," said Mr. Merton; "it is my wish that you should play."

The little creature was greatly embarrassed. She looked up at me pleadingly; I did not know how to advise her.

"Go on, Lorry," repeated Mr. Merton.

The child struck the keys again.

"Be quiet, I say!" cried Mrs. Merton. "You wilful child! I tell you my head aches. Miss Malcolmson, shut the piano—on her hands, if she won't remove them!"

"Miss Malcolmson shall do no such thing," said Mr. Merton, rising. "If your head aches," he continued, looking at his wife with so dark an expression on his face that his rugged features seemed transformed into a mask covering his real countenance, "go to the library or the dining-room: you will be quiet there."

He approached Laura, and placed himself between her and her mother, as if to protect her.

"Play, my pet," he said.

But Laura was in tears, sobbing grievously. She turned to her father, took his hand, and laid her cheek against his arm. I heard a step behind me, and the cover of the piano was closed with a sharp report.

"When I give an order I shall expect you to obey it for the future," said Mrs. Merton, with her black eyes flashing close to my face.

"Miss Malcolmson, take Laura to your room," said Mr. Merton.

I took the child's hand, and walked to the door, expecting every moment to be re-called by Mrs. Merton. Glad was I to get into the hall. As I closed the door, I heard Mr. Merton addressing his wife in a voice so deep and fierce that I could scarce credit it was his.

CHAPTER VI.

I FIND MR. MERTON VERY PLAIN-SPOKEN.

THE lamp in my room was lighted, the windows open. The coolness of the air and the mellow illumination of the lamp were delicious, after the perfumed feverish air of the drawing-room. Laura had ceased her sobs.

"We are better here," I said, drawing her to the window. "See how calm and beautiful the night is! If it were earlier we would go into the grounds to the fountains, and look at the stars in the water."

The idea struck her as I had intended it should, and took her thoughts away from the cause of her tears.

"Is it too late?" she asked. "I should like to see the stars in the water."

"It is too late now," I answered. "It is a quarter-past eight. But if you like I will shut

the window, and tell you a story of a star that fell into the water, and became a lily."

She was eager to hear the tale which lay quite undeveloped in my mind; but whilst I closed the window I set my imagination to work, and by the time I had her on my knee, had invented a little fable, too poor to write down, but entertaining enough to the little girl, thanks to her pure and generous imagination, not to mine. When I had done with my story of the star, which pleased her so well that she paid me the high compliment of obliging me to repeat it—thereby sending my tiny novelette into a second edition—I took up her doll, and made it the heroine of my next romance. Numerous were the adventures I made dolly pass through. Othello's narrative of his hair-breadth escapes to Desdemona were but trifling compared to the astounding dangers dolly had gone through before she had found an asylum in sweet Laura's arms. Drawing my inspiration from recollections of the fairy-tales I had devoured when I was a child, I immured dolly in castles, the victim of scaly monsters, with green beards and blood-shot eyes, and then set some exquisitely beautiful and bold knight to liberate her. I started her on a voyage to the South

Sea Islands, found her a home and a husband among the coral rocks of the Pacific, restored her to England, a widow, on the back of an affectionate dolphin, started her on a journey to the green caves of the moon in quest of some wonderful honey, which converted into the most beautiful gingerbread whatever it was spread on.

"A common biscuit?" cried Laura, eagerly.

"Yes," answered I, "or a shaving of wood or the sole of an old boot."

Long before I had done, I could see by Laura's glances that dolly had taken a significance in her sight which was far superior to any importance that could be claimed by flesh and blood. The coloured beads in the sockets of wax were charged with memories marvellous as the windows of a toy-shop.. In that small head, elegantly decorated with flaxen curls, what astonishing conceptions had been bred! what daring dreams cherished! what audacious adventures meditated! Not to me was due the metamorphosis of this staring puppet into a glorious and admirable heroine, but to that wonderful and impassioned imagination which is childhood's most divine privilege. Who does not long to live again in that world of shadows which is the child's real world?

Have we any right to pique ourselves on the maturing sense that dispels those lovely illusions? Alas! the innocent dreamland is only dissolved to make room for other shadows less true, less good, less holy; false semblances of truth which lure, mislead, and destroy. Who is the wiser dreamer? The child whose open soul mirrors nature as a calm lake the objects that surround it, magnifying without distorting, and turning into tremulous fantasies its own loving picturings? or the experienced man spinning endless hopes of wealth and power and fame? When the child's shadow-land dies upon the sober sky of reason, the heart is still found pure. But how is it with the man when *his* dreams vanish?

My stories achieved the double purpose of passing the time and clearing little Laura's mind of her grief. At nine, the footman brought up a tray bearing some refreshments; and shortly after supper I accompanied Laura to her bedroom. I sat with her for a short time after she had fallen asleep; and then, fancying I had heard footsteps in the passage, I returned to the sitting-room, expecting to meet Mrs. Saunders, and be entertained with a confidential chat.

On entering, however, to my surprise I saw Mr. Merton standing with his back to the mantelpiece.

"Is Lorry asleep?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"I will go and kiss her. Is there a light?"

I replied that there was, and he went out, saying he would be back in a few moments. He was absent five minutes, and when he returned, he said:

"How calm that child's sleep is! It softens one's heart, and moves one, to look at a child's face in its slumbers. Sleep is candid as death; and if the soul has sorrow or crime or joy, you may read its story in a sleeper's countenance. If you look at Lorry, you will see no sign there but purity and repose. Yet knowing what the world is, how it contaminates, how it corrupts, how it betrays and wrongs and destroys, there must always be sadness mingled with the feelings which a little child's face excites in those who watch it waking or at rest. Would that God, who gives us our children, would give us also the power to preserve their souls from harm."

I placed a chair for him, and remained standing.

"Please be seated," he said. "Do not

mind me. I am in trouble to think that you should have witnessed such an outbreak of Mrs. Merton's temper. But I cannot apologise for it. That would be foolish—for it would imply my promise to protect you from any further displays of the kind. How could I do this? I wish I knew how. But she is very violent; these scenes are of frequent occurrence. You will treat them as indifferently as I do after you have been here a fortnight."

I seated myself, as he bade me; but remained silent, for I did not know what answer to make.

"You were rather scared, were you not?" he asked, smiling, but somewhat grimly. "I caught you looking at me in a very questioning manner, as if you should say, 'Account to me for this phenomenon.'"

"Indeed, sir—" I began.

"Pray do not be embarrassed. It is astounding what an equalising influence rage exercises. The king in his passion is not half so dignified as the cool lackey whom he curses."

"Mrs. Merton is merely a little capricious, sir. We all have our hobbies; music is hers, and——"

"Capricious! Is that your word? You are wonderfully good-natured, Miss Malcolmson. How old did you tell me you were?"

"Eighteen!" I answered, wonderingly.

"And where were you brought up?"

I mentioned the name of the place.

"Is that a city?"

"No, a small village."

"Ah, that accounts for your provincial views. Don't think me sarcastic. When one speaks of provincial, one may mean something very fragrant and fresh and—green. And not so green either," he continued, eyeing me curiously, "or you would not call my wife capricious. You would give her temper the only name that fits it."

I was abashed by his odd language and manner. Nor did I much like the suggestion implied in the latter part of his speech. I would much rather have been thought impertinent than deceitful. So after reflecting a few moments, I said, bluntly:

"My position does not qualify me to be candid, sir. Moreover, the subject is necessarily delicate."

"Wonderfully delicate!" he exclaimed, scornfully. "And wonderfully indelicate, too, I think. No true woman could make

such an exhibition of herself before a stranger, and, what is worse, before her daughter."

It struck me that I should be treading on surer ground if I met him in his own downright way. So I said—and I found it easier to speak to him after his own fashion—

"I am more sorry for Laura than for you, sir."

"Why?"

No doubt he knew my reason; but my altered tone seemed to amuse him.

"A child," I answered, "is defenceless against bad temper; but a man can always protect himself."

"How? You pique my curiosity." Saying which he seated himself.

"It seems to me no difficult task for a man to protect himself against his wife."

"What would you have him do?"

"If I were a man I might know. As a woman, I have no right to betray my sex by instructing you, sir."

"Would you have him leave her?"

"Certainly not. He is sworn to her for better and worse."

"Would you have him treat her as a schoolmaster does a refractory pupil: put her on bread and water, or use the cane?"

"The magistrates would interfere."

"What would you have him do?"

"As he would be sure to know of the existence of her bad temper, I would advise him not to provoke it."

"Then you would have him bite his tongue off, for every sentence he utters is a provocation."

"He must learn tact."

"Supposing he has tact, which, in such a case as we are imagining, is another name for amiability. Suppose he bears patiently for years with her violent passions. Suppose he exerts his utmost endeavours to keep her temper cool, and when he fails, suppose he still sits meekly under her mad language. Suppose, in short, he tries what severity will do and what kindness will do, and finds everything fail. What then? . . . But how should you be able to answer, Miss Malcolmson? At eighteen our capacity for sympathising is enormous, and we can find excuses for the devil himself!"

And then growing grave again, almost grim, for he had been speaking in a half bantering voice, he said:

"I agree with you that Laura is to be pitied. I grieve for my pet. Happily her

heart is good, her instincts sound; and these, with the blessing of heaven, will keep her straight. But if this were not so, if she were not the generous-hearted little creature she is, I should fear for her future. For how is a child to prosper whose mother does not love it, nor set it a good example, nor tenderly discipline its nature? A father can do little, though he may wish to do much. Children have not the sympathy with their fathers which they have with their mothers." He added, passionately, "A child is better off whose mother is dead, than a child with a living woman who leaves every maternal duty unfulfilled."

"She is, sir."

"A dead mother may leave sweet memories behind: and they make a legacy that sanctifies a child's heart. The influence of a mother who has been true to her children in life, does not depart when she dies. She still appeals, soothes, inspires, blesses them from the grave. The voice speaking out of the stillness of death is often more powerful and stirring than the accents of the living parent. But a bad mother makes her child's heart sick. Look into Lorry's eyes sometimes when she is grave—I mean when she is silent and

pensive—and mark an under-colouring of sadness there. My heart recognises it as the most moving piece of pathos it ever felt. I suppose that there are subtle sympathies subsisting between parent and child, which privilege me to understand Lorry as nobody else could, unless it were her mother. True she is a young thing yet, and her needs and aspirations are all unformed, imperfectly understood by herself. But I *feel* that she craves a mother's love, a mother's tenderness, the hundred ministrations of a mother's heart; and it makes me fretful and miserable, Miss Malcolmson, to know that her longings will never be satisfied."

He walked over to one of the windows, stood before it some moments, and then opened it. The soft air rushed in, bearing on its wings the silvery echo of a harp and the tones of a woman singing. He seemed to listen. I saw him take his handkerchief and press it to his forehead. Suddenly he turned and exclaimed in a surprised voice:

"In my abstraction I have opened the window. I hope you will pardon the liberty? The room was warm, my head burns—but my best apology is that I did not know what I was about."

"I like the air, sir," I answered; "and Mrs. Merton's voice sounds very agreeably on the stillness."

"How *can* she sing? how *can* she sing?" he muttered, looking into the darkness with his body inclined forward.

He did not speak again for some minutes, but remained at the window motionless as a statue. The voice of the singer rose and sank, presently ceased; and then the repose was oppressive. A clock far off struck ten. He closed the window and came from it. The tray containing my supper stood upon the table. He poured a little wine into a tumbler, filled it with water, and drank it feverishly. I looked at his face and was struck by the expression there. It was despondent to the degree that touches hopelessness, but stern withal. The veins about his temples were slightly swelled; when he looked at me or turned his eyes about the room, there was a labouring slowness in his gaze that indicated thought at once deep and gloomy.

He stood by the table, leaning upon it. I was embarrassed by the silence, yet could find nothing to say. Soon his eyes, leaving one of the pictures on which they had settled, encountered mine; he seemed to wake up, drew himself erect, and said with a smile,

"I am keeping you from your rest."

"No, indeed, sir."

"Laura goes to bed at nine. You will, I fear, find it dull alone after she has left you."

"I am well provided with books," I answered, grateful for his consideration.

"One must have a tranquil mind to read; but that you have."

He looked towards the door; but still he lingered.

"I have had my share of trouble," I said, "but I am tranquil now."

"Trouble is the common lot. We cried when we came into the world, says Goldsmith, and every day tells us why. You are tranquil now, I suppose, because you are independent?"

"Independent of those who made dependence bitter, sir."

"There are people born with the knack of making dependence bitter. But independence can be made bitter too, sometimes. Do you like this house?"

I took his meaning literally, and answered,

"It is a noble building."

"I should have asked, do you like your position?"

"Yes, sir, and I am grateful to those who have given it to me."

"Grateful! then you are thankful for small mercies. Still it is a wise philosophy to be satisfied. Contentment is the one agreeable condition of life, and it is almost universally denied."

"It is well to be content, sir."

"I wish I had mastered that art when I was a younger man. To be content, to be satisfied with what you have, to have no insane craving for more; to learn to leave well alone—ah! who can practise these golden rules? Life is an aspiration from beginning to end: and the aspiration of madmen, for they covet what will make them miserable. I would to God it were permitted to those who wished it, to know the future. Sages tell us such a desire is unholy and unwise: but, could we foresee, we might escape much misery of our own making. Such sorrows as come from God, He gives us fortitude enough to endure. What we cannot endure is the memory and consequences of our own folly."

"But the trick of being content, which you covet, sir, will make us satisfied with whatever befalls us."

He broke away as it were from his thoughts with a laugh.

"You are an excellent logician for so young

a lady; but I must keep you up no longer. Good night."

I opened the door for him to pass out; he thanked me with a low bow. I heard him walking softly along the passage for fear of waking Laura. His footsteps died and I was left alone with silence.

I was of the age that is easily flattered; and I must own I felt highly complimented by Mr. Merton's visit and the familiar conversation he had had with me. Yet I found much food for thought in his language and manner. I had conceit enough to suppose that he must find something agreeable in my society; but not enough conceit to suppose that the pleasure of my company was the sole motive of his prolonged chat. My feminine instincts hit upon several causes. One was his reluctance to return to the drawing-room; another his anxiety to enlist my sympathy with his child. He had sense enough to know that more than money was needful to procure that sisterly affection which he evidently wanted his daughter's governess to feel for her. It had also appeared to me that he was sensible of a feeling of relief in talking, however vaguely, of his troubles. He possibly found or fancied me an excellent listener; and

was pretty sure my youth would make me a sympathetic one. My respectful manner moreover flattered, so to speak, his sorrow; the sense of condescension seemed to excuse his candour. Indeed, young as I was, I could enter into his mind sufficiently to understand that he was much more likely to be plain in his remarks to me than he was to one in his own station. Pride would keep him silent before his equals. But the labour of cloaking his feelings would make the need of imparting them from time to time imperative. If he had spoken to me about his wife it was because he gave me the credit of being sympathetic enough to feel for his trouble, and honest enough to respect his confidences. So at least I argued to myself, whether rightly or wrongly I was yet to know. I had a feeling, however, that the day would come when he would talk to me with much less reserve than he had exhibited so far. If in less than two days I had involuntarily succeeded in inviting his confidence, I might expect him to grow tolerably candid when my association with his child and her affection for me should cause him, as I was sure it would, to look upon me more partially.

CHAPTER VII.

JANE WAKEFIELD.

I HAD wondered if we were to be entertained every evening with Mrs. Merton's bad temper. But I found after I had been in the house some days, that her passion had its intermissions, and that two, and sometimes three, evenings would pass without our being embarrassed by any decisive displays.

As I saw her only during the evenings, I had no notion, beyond what I could gather from the "scenes" I was a witness to, of the sort of life she led her husband during the day. Perhaps they did not quarrel so much when they were alone as I imagined. It seemed to me as if Mr. Merton rather enjoyed making his wife show off the paces of her temper before others, for he had an irritating way of talking *at* her, and she was a com-

bustible that needed but a spark to set aflame. If, therefore, he liked an audience, there was the probability that when he could not collect one, he left his wife alone. His behaviour to her was somewhat enigmatical. He appeared to dally with his own trouble. Why did he care to say anything to provoke her when he must have known her facility of working herself into a fury? Yet his nonchalance, during the periods of her raging, was surprising to witness. Had he been at a fair surveying the antics of a tumbler, he could not have looked on his wife's Vashti-like impersonation with more equanimity.

Indeed at times I have witnessed on his face when his eyes have met mine, or turned upon Laura, a smile half suppressed and chilling: malevolent through its mixture of contempt and mirth and hate. He challenged his wife's rage; then critically eyed the exhibition with a species of simpering disgust, such as a male dancer excites in men.

The conundrum was a baffling one. I could not reconcile his manner with the grief and pain which, he had implied to me, his wife's wild temper gave him. I would think that his desire of sympathy sought gratification by *proving* to Laura and me how much he

suffered, and for that end set the machinery of his wife's passions in motion. Yet it was only when we were alone during the evening that he would so behave. Neighbours, obviously desirous to be on friendly terms with the Mertons, would sometimes drop in—young girls, followed by footmen with portfolios of music; gentlemen, to smoke a cigar with Mr. Merton; old ladies, charged from the heart to the tongue with gossip. And before them Mr. Merton was wonderfully reserved and cautious in his behaviour to his wife. In short, when there was anybody else present besides Laura and myself, he seemed as anxious to keep Mrs. Merton in a good temper as on other occasions he was disposed to aggravate her.

Why did he like to force her to make a spectacle of herself before us? It would, indeed, be reasonable to suppose that in his family circle he would be less guarded in his remarks than were strangers by to listen; but feeling, as he must have felt, the degradation involved in his wife's intemperate displays before her little girl and me; and pretending, as he did, to suffer so much grief through these exhibitions, why, I would ask myself, was he so careless in the language he held,

why so shrewdly aggressive in the remarks he would make ?

Had I dared have taken the liberty to question him on this, no doubt he would have answered that he was not conscious of saying anything to provoke her ; he would have told me that such was her temper, the most innocent observation—made without the least reference to her, and plainly, therefore, uttered without design to give offence—would be caught up by her and resented as an insult.

This indeed was superficially true—true exteriorly. But it was not altogether true. It would not have satisfied me. I was as certain as that I lived, that many of the remarks he uttered, and which he would have declared to me to be spoken without any wish to anger her, were purposely made to put her in a passion. If that were his object he was rarely unsuccessful. I have seen him lounge into the room when Mrs. Merton, Laura, and I have been alone, seat himself at a distance from his wife, and heard him say something—something absolutely trivial if you will—which yet seemed precisely the remark to put her in a rage.

"Wonderful!" I used to exclaim mentally,

when I saw the blood rise to her face, and the fire leap from her eyes as she looked at him; "if *I* had said that she would probably have agreed with me, or passed it over unnoticed."

And often, if he found his remark not to produce the effect he appeared uniformly prepared to witness, he would follow it up with some observation or other that was as certain to provoke her as if he had addressed her with downright rudeness.

Meanwhile you must not suppose that Mrs. Merton and I got on together in the sense those words usually imply. Had I not been docile, watchful, reserved, I doubt if I should have held my position in her house a month. I cannot conceive that there ever existed a more trying woman to those whom she did not feel it incumbent upon her to please. It was quite painful to hear her order the servants. There was so much insufferable haughtiness and impatience and passion, mixed up in the tone she employed to them, that I used sometimes to wonder at their obedience. This manner she adopted towards me, but not in an equal degree.

Very shortly after I had come to Ashleigh Manor she ceased to ask me any questions

about Laura. I saw that she cared no more for her child than she cared for anybody else. Whenever she condescended to converse with me, her manner was a sorer trial to my temper than I believed it could have met with fortitude. She erected a barrier between us as defined as if it had been a wall of flint. She wrapped herself in a species of haughty, distant, impenetrable reserve, which my spirits felt as your body feels the east wind, but out of which her passion would make her leap, like a tigress from its lair. I needed all the self-conceit I could muster not to be sunk by her manner into a sense of kinship with the servants who waited upon us. Her haughtiness would have been made ludicrous by her fits of passion, had her passion been less tragical. It was impossible to behold her dash aside the cloak of pride and step forth swelling and furious with rage, and not feel how immeasurably inferior she was to the servants she railed at, to the very poodle who crept to her feet as though it remembered her hand. I dare say I could have made my intercourse with her easier had I condescended to flatter her; but by degrees I acquired too great a dislike and contempt and fear of her to make her the smallest undeserved compli-

ment. Sometimes I had the good fortune to say something to gratify her—I would admire her dress or a piece of jewellery, or her coiffure—on which occasions she would grow gracious on a sudden, unbend and invite a more downright flattery by showing how she relished even a questionable compliment. Yet on the whole I seemed to fare better with her than anybody else in the house, thanks to my cautious silence and to the short hours I was condemned to pass in her company.

I am drawing a very unamiable character; and you will perhaps charge me with laying on the blacks and whites without any regard to middle colours. But to tell the truth, when I review Mrs. Merton's character—or what I saw of it—I can find nothing to say in her favour. The prejudices which are slowly formed have their roots deep. I never made haste to like or dislike anybody; but when once the prejudice had thoroughly possessed me I found it quite impossible to get rid of. I disliked Mrs. Merton, and my dislike is strong upon me whilst I write this. If I draw her character with charcoal it is because memory forbids me to use a more delicate pencil.

Sometimes in watching her I would try to

think of any points in her character which would account for Mr. Merton having married her. That her temper was a weed of no recent growth was easily seen; her nature was very clearly expressed in her face, and her face had worn Passion's signal for many a long year. There was something altogether too uncurbed and tameless about her to intimate that her character had been in any degree aggravated since her marriage.

It was difficult to believe that with such a temper as hers, her face and form could have found any favour in Mr. Merton's eyes. Yet in the absence of all mental points of attraction, I was compelled to believe that he had married her solely because he had admired her. The life they led would, to a cynic, have furnished pretty good evidence to their having married for love. I will not go so far as to say that she hated him; the conclusion is too melo-dramatic. Yet I know not by what other term to express the feelings she appeared to have for him. There was more than distrust, there was more than aversion in the look she would greet him with when he entered the room where she was. His presence made her uneasy; the blood left her face, returned there; if she were reading a

book the page would at once lose its interest as you might tell by observing the expression on her face, and the frowning concentration of gaze she would fix upon the print.

As for *him*, I could not for the life of me guess the real feelings that inspired him towards her. He tried to express by his face a grievance, a melancholy: but there was always something in his eye which belied this statement of his feelings.

Sometimes I considered his strong, rugged face no better than a mask behind which the real man sat and looked his true thoughts with his eyes. At other times I would conceive that I wronged him: that he was in verity a sad, ill-used, patient creature who would gladly barter the whole of his possessions for the privilege of being a bachelor. How they had contrived to live together for twelve long years I could not understand. The form and face that had enchanted and ensnared must surely have lost their spell very shortly after marriage. There was not a particle of sympathy between them. She was common-place, even dull, vain, capricious, contemptuous, viewing life with a cold and selfish eye, and finding no deeper interests in

it than such as the dress-makers and milliners created. He on the other hand was of a temperament dreamy, speculative, poetical; though never had man a robuster, a more muscular, a more expanded mind. He was always affable, though often whimsical in the expression of his politeness, courteous and considerate in his treatment of those beneath him, gentle and grave with his equals, devoted to his child. Were not here materials which the hand of a loving woman might have wrought into a good and noble life? And yet there was something in his character that baffled me; something made sinister by secrecy. His eyes were all mildness, they were almost sweet when he looked at his child; but when he turned them from his wife I would note in them an expression vague, indefinable; so subtle, it might have been the creation of my fancy. The expression made his eyes magnetic. I watched them at such times with a species of fascination that was made painful by foreboding. They repelled me whilst they detained me.

There was one person who, excepting Laura, interested me more than any other member of that household. This was Mrs Merton's maid, Jane Wakefield.

I was drawn to her in the first instance by a sentiment of pity. I had been told that she was an orphan, and the fellow-feeling that makes us wondrous kind had established this fact in my mind as a bond of union between her and me. But my pity was chiefly due to the sense of the suffering which I conceived the young girl could not fail to endure under such a mistress as Mrs. Merton.

Laura had told me of her having seen the girl crying whilst she did her mistress's hair; and I could readily believe that these were not the only tears the girl had been made to shed since she had been in Mrs. Merton's service.

Living as I did in a separate part of the house—Jane's room was over her mistress's, in the west wing, and all her duties lay in that part—the probability was that I might have passed a twelvemonth without speaking to her, had not accident brought her one day to my room.

Laura was in the grounds with Mr. Merton; I was alone, reading by the open window, when the door opened. I looked round and saw Jane Wakefield. She coloured up and said, with a little confusion,

"I beg your pardon, miss, I didn't know you were here."

"Did you want Miss Laura?"

"No, miss."

And then after a little pause, she said:

"I came to take one of the books here. Mistress has gone for a drive, and I felt dull."

"Pray take any book you like. Are you fond of reading?"

"I used to be very fond; but I have no time now."

"I suppose not. I daresay Mrs. Merton finds you plenty of employment?"

"There's always something to do," she answered with a sigh.

She looked pale and careworn. She was very neatly dressed in black, her hair was becomingly done. In spite of her paleness she appeared to me extremely pretty. But what chiefly pleased me was her modest, respectful manner, and the clear, educated way in which she pronounced her words.

"Are you a native of Ashleigh?" I asked.

"No, miss, I come from Warwickshire."

"You must have a very neat hand to fill the place of lady's-maid."

I had heard from Mrs. Saunders that she did a good deal of sewing for Mrs. Merton, and could cut out dresses very well.

"I am fond of sewing. Mother was a dressmaker, and had a large business, and though I was but thirteen when I began work under her, she used to say that I was the best hand she had."

"I have been told that you are an orphan. Have you no relatives?" I inquired, looking at her with much interest, for I was struck by the delicacy of her features and the singularly appealing expression of her eyes.

"None, miss. Mother died four years ago. Father's death broke her heart. She only outlived him eighteen months."

"And were you left to shift for yourself?"

"Yes. Though mother's connection was very good, and supported father and her comfortably, the business was very expensive to carry on, and when she died it was found that she had left very little. A lady took charge of me, and it was through attending on her that I became fit for a lady's-maid. Mother wouldn't have liked the thought of my becoming a servant; but we must all get our bread somehow."

"How do you like Mrs. Merton?"

She looked at me hesitatingly, and a little pink stole into her cheek. I admired the mild candour of her eyes, and thought well of

her for the pause she made. One of your conventional servants, conscious that I was free of the drawing-room, would have answered me with a lie: "I likes missus very well hindeed, mum."

"I dare say," I continued, "you don't like her very much. It is difficult to get on with a lady who is so sudden-tempered."

"I try to please her; but mistress is very hard to please."

"I know that from experience. I dare say she often speaks harshly to you?"

"Yes, miss. She doesn't care what she says nor what she does. Only this morning she slapped my face with the back of a brush because I didn't do her hair as high as she likes to wear it. But it *won't* sit, miss. It is so thick and heavy that it *will* droop."

"I suppose you will not care to keep your situation long?"

"I don't want to leave if I can help it. I have no friends; and if mistress should refuse to give me a character, as she's threatened over and over again when I've happened to do something wrong—and that's very often—I shouldn't know what to do."

"Yes, I see your position is a difficult one. But I don't suppose your case is very much

harder than those of the others in the house. We have all got to put up with her as best we can, in one way or another. I dare say Mr. Merton suffers most."

"I am sure he does," she answered, quickly. "Nobody knows but I how badly mistress treats him. It is terrible to see the way she flies at him, sometimes for no reason at all. He occasionally comes to her bedroom when I am there; but she doesn't mind my being present at all. If he asks her a question, she snaps at him as if she would bite him. And very often she flies at him without his speaking. I don't know how master stands it. I've read in stories that gentlemen have shot or drowned themselves for less troubles than master has."

"You must not believe everything you read," said I, smiling at the simple way in which she spoke. "It takes a long time for wives to kill their husbands by bad treatment. Men sometimes kill themselves for their sweethearts; but they grow more rational when they marry. How do you account for Mrs. Merton's bad temper? Do you think there is any reason for it apart from her nature?"

"I don't, miss; I think it is her nature, and nothing more. I have not been here very

long," she went on in a subdued voice, throwing a glance over her shoulders towards the door as she spoke; "but you'd be shocked were you to hear some of the stories of her rage which I could tell you."

"Don't mind speaking to me plainly. I am anxious to hear all I can about Mrs. Merton, that I may know how to deal with her. I like her as little as you do. But I am not wishful to lose my place, for, like you, I am an orphan, and without friends."

"Are you, indeed, miss? You are very young to be doing for yourself."

"And so are you."

"Ah, yes; but then you see, I was brought up to do work of one kind or another. But you were not. You are a lady, miss."

"So much the worse for me if I am. If a woman is to be born poor, she had better be born a working man's daughter than a nobleman's. Genteel poverty is a heavy curse. But tell me about Mrs. Merton. And sit down—pray do."

"I had rather not, thanking you kindly," she answered, looking at the bookcase. "I must be going soon, for I never know when mistress returns, and if I am not on the spot when her bell rings, I have to pay pretty

dearly for it." After a moment's reflection she added, "I don't know that I have got anything particular to say about Mrs. Merton. When I told you that my stories would make you wonder, I meant to say you would be surprised to hear how constantly she storms at me and master and anybody near her, and how wicked are some of the words she uses. I am pretty sure she can't be a born lady. No real lady would know such words as she uses."

"She certainly seems a terrible woman."

"I have seen her," she said, earnestly, advancing a step, and speaking in a low voice, "threaten master's life. One evening I thought she would have killed him. It's now a month ago. They were going out to a ball, and I was helping Mrs. Merton to dress, when master came into the room. He was as amiable and pleasant as he always is when he walked in, and he stood looking at her and me for a little, and I thought he was admiring her dress. Presently he said, 'That head-gear,' for that was what he called mistress's wreath that lay on the dressing-table, 'that head-gear,' he says, 'will make you look very killing to-night.' She gave him a short answer, which he did not seem to mind. He went on saying other things to her; but I

didn't listen to him, being too much engaged with my work, for when I am attending on mistress I dare not think of anything else, for fear I should make a mistake, or not pay attention to her orders. She was standing before the looking-glass, and I was hooking her skirt behind, kneeling down to do it, when something he said to her about Captain Fow ler—a name that always put them both in a passion—made her give a start. She turned upon him with such a torrent of fierce and low words, that I got up trembling with fear. She called him every bad name that she could think of. Some of her back hair got unloosed, through the way she jerked her head about and her arms, and she looked like a mad woman, with her face and neck discoloured with rage, and her eyes blazing. He stood looking at her with a cold face; and his coolness made her more angry, for all of a sudden she ran to the dressing-room and rushed at him, holding a knife which I had brought her that very afternoon to cut the strings of a band-box with. I screamed when I saw her make a thrust at his breast, for I made sure he would be killed. I believed that the sight of his blood would turn her mad, and that she would stab me. But he got out of her

way somehow, and I heard his hand fall upon her wrist with a loud slap. The knife dropped on the floor; he pushed her away from him, picked up the knife, and walked out of the room. I thought at first that he had broken her arm, by the way she held it and groaned, and by her lips, which were as white as her cheeks, as if she were in pain, for all the blood left her face when he pushed her, and she looked dreadfully scared; indeed, the marks on her arm were almost black. She remained trembling and shuddering, looking at her arm, and then she fell into a chair, and called to me to get her vinaigrette. She told me to bathe her forehead with lavender water. It was a shocking scene. I shall never forget it. I often dream of it, and wake up thinking she is trying to kill me.

"Did she go to the ball?"

"No, miss. She made me undress her, and though it was only half-past nine, she went to bed."

"Surely she must be crazy. She cannot always be in her right senses."

"I don't think she is mad," she answered, simply; "but she is so wicked in her heart, that I often wonder God allows her to live. She tells her husband terrible falsehoods."

"About what?" I inquired.

"I don't think I ought to say, miss," she answered, uneasily. "If mistress were to know that I have been talking to you like this, she would turn me away on the spot."

"But she shall not know. Set your mind at rest on that score. It is natural that I should desire to hear as much as I can be told of the people I am living among. Of course I do not want you to tell me any secrets that Mrs. Merton may have imparted to you. I only wish to be made acquainted with her general conduct. I see so little of her, that I can hardly form a just opinion."

"Oh, mistress never tells me any secrets. But sometimes I find things out; and when I hear the answers she makes to her husband's questions, I know she tells him dreadful falsehoods."

"Who is this Captain Fowler, whose name I have heard mentioned several times since I have been here?"

"He is a friend of mistress."

"Does he ever call?"

"No, master has forbidden him the house. I have heard from one of the servants that Captain Fowler used to be very much here, until one day there was a terrible quarrel in

the drawing-room, and after that he never came again."

I hardly liked to make any further inquiries, for it was plain that the girl was growing reluctant in her answers. But my curiosity was so much excited by what she had already said, that I could not forbear saying to her:

"I suppose there is a good deal of jealousy mixed up in these quarrels between Mr. and Mrs. Merton?"

"I don't think master cares enough for Mrs. Merton to be jealous of her. It is mostly her own bad temper that causes the quarrels between them."

"But I suppose that Mr. Merton would be very angry if he were to know, for instance, that Mrs. Merton speaks to Captain Fowler, after he has been forbidden the house."

She answered almost in a whisper:

"Master doesn't know, but she *does* meet Captain Fowler very often. They write to each other, too, though I don't know how she gets his letters without Mr. Merton knowing. I think that Captain Fowler leaves them for her somewhere at the bottom of the grounds."

"How do you know that they meet and write to each other?" I inquired, seriously.

"Because I have come across some of his

letters to her which she has left about, and some of her letters to him which she didn't send, or else asked him for them again after she had sent them."

"Left about! Do you mean to say that she would be so careless as to leave such letters as those about?"

"I mean, I came across them in a drawer where she keeps her gloves, and which I found unlocked. I couldn't help reading them. It was wicked of me to do so, I know. But when once I began to read, I couldn't stop. I am sure she would kill me," she exclaimed, making a terrified gesture with her hand, "were she to know that I had read those letters, or had even discovered their existence."

She added, after a little:

"The words have burned in my mouth to tell master the truth when he has asked questions before me. Very often he inquires if she ever meets Captain Fowler, and she always answers scornfully aud quickly, no. Mr. Merton is being wronged, but I have not the courage to tell him. It would be sure to cost me my place, for I should have to say that I had read her letters. Promise me not to speak about it, miss!" she cried, clasp-

ing her hands, and looking at me plaintively.

"Certainly I will promise. Do not think for an instant that I have been inviting your confidence to betray you. All that you told me is sacred."

The tears started to her eyes; but hastily brushing them away, she said:

"Will you let me take one of your books now, miss, if you please?"

I told her to choose a volume, and having provided herself, she dropped me a curtsey and was about going, when I said:

"I shall always be glad to have a chat with you here whenever you can find time to come. You must carry a brave heart. If Mrs. Merton treats you harshly, remember that you are qualifying yourself to undertake the same situation elsewhere. That is the thought I console myself with when Mrs. Merton has said something to pain me."

"Ah, you are not like me," she answered. "I could be happy with such a room as this, and with dear Miss Laura for a companion."

And giving me another curtsey, she went away.

I had little time for thought, for the girl had not been gone three minutes, when Laura

ran into the room. But when the evening had come, and I had put my little charge to bed. I mused a long while over Wakefield's stories, with a feeling that it was hardly possible for matters to go on much longer as they were, and that I had entered the theatre in time to witness the most exciting scene in the matrimonial drama that had been twelve years playing.

CHAPTER VIII.

MY HERMITAGE.

THOUGH the land lying round about Ashleigh Manor was flat, and rich by reason of its high cultivation, without being in any degree picturesque, the lover of noble scenery was well compensated by the rugged and impressive aspect of the sea coast. The cliffs, brown, cavernous, and piled in mighty blocks, presented an iron front to the sea, at some points a hundred feet in elevation. Between many of the rocks were fissures high enough for a man to stand upright in. From the sands the cliffs resemble a species of titanic Stonehenge. It would seem as though, in days of yore, when giants walked the earth, the people inhabiting this part of the coast had endeavoured to obstruct the undermining action of the sea by rolling these mighty blocks to the base of

the cliff, and setting them one upon the other until a colossal rampart had been formed. Many of the blocks stood in the water, some long and low, like the hull of a half-sunk ship; some angular and spiral, as if a little village had been submerged to its roofs and steeple, which the winds and waves had turned black. These might have been the blocks for which the giants who had constructed the rampart had found no use. When the water was smooth and glassy, these rocks mirrored their black shapes in its depths, and gave a picturesque variety to the green or blue tide that circled them. In wild weather the waves smote themselves into cataracts of foam against their unmitigable fronts.

The beach was a broad space of sand, brown and sparkling, stretching away a full league before the cliffs hit it. It was as firm beneath the tread as a wooden platform; intermixed with but few pebbles and shells; but great masses of rock, detached from the rampart, were embedded many feet in all directions, covered with long strings of black seaweed, and surrounded with little moats filled with shining water in which you might see the pale shrimps sporting, or the speckled crabs burrowing into the sand.

Laura was my frequent companion in walks upon the beach; but sometimes she would be taken for a drive by her mother, or for a stroll by her father; and on such occasions I could make the beach the magic circle of intense solitude. With Laura gambolling in front of me, I could not enjoy a complete sense of seclusion. Her infantile movements, her gay voice, filled the scene with human animation and the familiar interest of life. But when I took my walks alone, I could enjoy the spell of solitude as long as I chose; for there was no fishing-village within three miles of this part of the coast, and the ships at sea seldom came so near to the horizon that, from the level of the beach, you could see their hulls.

Though too young to be a very wise moralist, I loved to indulge in the long reveries which the deep and melancholy voice of the sea never failed to inspire. To think upon the ocean's insatiability; to remark even in the breaker that crisply foamed at my feet, an illustration of its cruelty; how it played, as a cat with a mouse, with the shell which it left for a moment upon the beach, then ran forward to claw it again with its white talons, leaving it once more adry, to overpower it afresh, and drag it, rattling and expostulating,

back again to its jaws; to note the ferocity of its sport, how its waves smote and slew one another, though others leaped straightway into the huge arena to take up the endless game of smiting and destroying—how fertile of suggestion! how fertile of incident!

It would be my humour. sometimes to apportion to each wave one of the million calamities caused by the ocean. That wave, I would think, fixing my eyes on a tall breaker rushing hungrily beach-wards, was the sea that smote some poor ship its death-blow and left her sinking far from shore. Its foam is the memory of the white faces that looked upon it as it thundered onward. In yonder little wave a baby may have been drowned. How tenderly and gracefully it sways and bends as though it sought to cradle for ever the tiny being that fell asleep in it. And yonder comes a sullen sea, lowering and dark with the shadow of the cloud above it on its brow. It is haunted with the image of the bad man who perished in its breast. Lo! it falls swartly on the beach and expires with a hiss; the leaping seas lap up its white blood.

I would find pleasure in writing my name, scrawling verses, drawing odd faces and forms with my parasol on the hard tablet of the beach.

And how would I moralise as I wrought the crude figure or scratched the halting couplet! Here is the permanency of life, I would think. Here is the symbol of human ambition. The poet carves his name upon the face of the world, as I draw my name here, and thinks it will last for ever. The artist stretches his canvas and paints the picture of which the glory and renown shall outlast the colours which create them. I write my poem on this sand; but on the morrow I return and behold! the poem is effaced. The sea has poured over it in the night, and the sun rose upon a beach so smooth that not even a toe-print of the being who yesterday laboured on its floor is preserved. Is not here a teacher of wise lessons? Get you gone to the beach, Master Preacher, and summon to you the lover that he may write his mistress's name; bid the politician draw near and scratch upon the hard and shining ground his place in history; call around you the young and the old, children and parents, the pious and the sinful, the libertine and the puritan, the sick and the healthy, and let them indent a foot deep their good or evil resolutions, their promises, their hopes, their affections, their desires, their sorrows. That wave there with white lips kissing the sand so ten-

derly, you would think it holy ground, will, before the hand of the Preacher's watch has travelled round the dial-plate, make a bitter irony of the records so gravely inscribed, by leaving the beach smooth and a fit playground for the eternal sport of the sea.

One afternoon I went down to the beach alone. I had left Laura at home with her father. The walk to the beach was a tolerably long one. You skirted many fields and clambered over many stiles before you came to the broad pathway running along the edge of the cliff, and which led to the Gap.

I generally rested here among the rocks before pursuing my way along the beach, and was always well repaid for the pause.

When the tide was high, the breakers churned among the rocks, rushing through their avenues with a voice of thunder, and leaving the floor of black pebbles gleaming like silver.

When the tide was low, it was a source of endless amusement to search the pools and crevices. There went a story that in one of the fissures a shrimper found a skeleton hand, bleached and polished by the sea into the hardness and colour of ivory, the fingers of which were decorated with handsome rings of

antique make. Others had found some old coins, chiefly Spanish, gold and silver, clustered in a small niche, as though some miserly merman had hidden the booty out of sight of his rapacious father, Neptune.

There was a recess in the rampart of cliff to which I often made my way when alone; for from it I could behold the sea shining as between the pillars of a portal, and mark the progress of the distant sail as it glided, like a cloud, along the bright line of the horizon.

In this cavern I could stand upright. On one side of it a ledge of gray rock projected which served me for a seat. When the sun was sinking in the west, it would throw its golden light upon this granite chamber and make the flint and pebbles in its walls sparkle with a lustre like the reflection of light in glass. I had long promised myself to bring some mould to this retreat, and make little beds around it in which I might plant flowers. I could conceive how charming this chamber would be, so gladdened and beautified by roses and violets; and by honeysuckle, which as it grew, I could train against the rock, until its tendrils should arch overhead and make a bower of the stony recess. I could also imagine the delicacy of the per-

fume of the flowers mingled with the salt breath of the ocean.

Having gained the beach, as I have told you, I sat down at the mouth of the Gap, meaning to rest awhile before making my way to the recess. I had three hours of holiday before me; the afternoon was bright and soft; in my pocket was a small volume of a favourite poet. With a gay heart I needed no other companion.

The recess was about a couple of hundred yards away on my left. Close to me was a great block of rock, around whose rugged side, by advancing my head, I could catch a glimpse of my private box in the cliff.

The sea was very smooth and radiant under the light of the westering sun and the beaming blue of the sky. The rocks stood swarthy in the circling tide, caressed by those breakers which to-morrow haply would be pitilessly mangling themselves against them.

No living creature was visible. I might almost have realised the weird conception of Campbell, and imagined myself the sole occupant of the globe.

> "Go, let Oblivion's curtain fall
> Upon the stage of men;
> Nor with the rising beams recall
> Life's tragedy again.

Its piteous pageants bring not back,
Nor waken flesh upon the rack
Of pain anew to writhe;
Stretched in disease's shapes abhorr'd,
Or mown in battle by the sword,
Like grass beneath the scythe."

But I was sufficiently rested, and now let me make my way to the hermitage.

I was in the act of bending forward to rise, when, to my profound astonishment, I saw a human form—the form of a man—standing at the entrance of the recess. From the ambush afforded me by the intervention of the rock, I watched him unseen.

I was, I say, amazed to behold him there. I considered that retreat mine. If, like me, he was fond of hermitising, why had he not chosen one of the other caverns with which the cliffs from east to west abounded? The law of priority gave me the title deeds of that chamber, and it was legally mine.

I looked at him with dismay. Henceforth I could enter that recess no more. Its secrecy had been violated; the presence of a stranger had deformed it with an alien memory; I could never occupy it again with comfort, nor cherish in its gloom and loneliness that fascinating sense of solitude which was the chief of the delightful feelings it inspired.

I felt angry. Who was that man? My eyes were good, and I could make out a tall figure, well dressed, a pale face with moustache and beard. He stood for some moments shading his eyes, and looking seaward, blew a cloud of tobacco smoke upon the air, and re-entered the recess.

Though he had as much right to that cavern as I had, I would not admit his right. Still, he was welcome to it now. He had stolen from it the sentiment which was the real furniture, and the retreat made naked and common-place by his despoiling presence, was of no further use to me. I must seek another recess. I must contrive this time that it should be higher in the cliffs. He looked a bit of a dandy, and his concern for his well-fitting clothes might make him unequal to the adventure of a scramble up the rocks. *His* recess lay in the west; mine I would seek nearer the sun. In some small fissure I would begin again the task of peopling the rocky retreat with sentimental interests; new dreams should haunt its precincts, new fantasies should flit pensively amid its gloom. There would I frame my lays and kindle into song; grow despondent under the labour of finding rhymes; indulge

my most ambitious hopes; and give fresh interpretations to the nimble accents of the sea.

I raised my eyes more hopefully, and regarded once more my retreat—no longer mine.

Ha! what do I see?

Did not the shepherd in Virgil find Love an inhabitant of the rocks? Such, too, is my experience. Those two there, standing so pensively at the mouth of *my* recess, are lovers. What else? Not man and wife, quotha. Matrimonial bills come not so far away from home to coo. Mark their attitudes. Husband and wife seldom stand so lovingly, unless there are lookers on. He takes her hand. Watch how he points to some tiny sail, visible from their altitude, or maybe he directs her attention to the splendour of the golden chasm which the sun's gorgeous beams have opened in the sea.

What poetry is he talking now? Does he murmur, or is his voice strung to its natural pitch? Is he wishing for some sweet little isle of his own, which he might make their home, and that they were both on board yonder tiny vessel sailing to it? Does she sigh, is she touched by his eloquence, or

is she thinking him tedious, and the sea, the beach, the rocks very well in their way, but boring when you get used to them ?

But whilst I watch, I give a start—I feel myself turn pale.

Have the Dromios sisters, like to each other as their brothers ? did one of them marry Mr. Merton, and is yonder woman Mr. Merton's wife's sister, or is it in sooth Mrs. Merton herself ?

I rub my eyes and look again.

Under a doubt as heavy as a shock the faculties lose their cunning. A painful, a terrible discovery, momentarily drives you, recoiling, into a sort of dreamland. The great Lie that faces you, turns into untruth all things else. Realisation for the time being grows difficult. The faculties must wake up before conviction can enter.

It was thus with me. That woman *was* Mrs. Merton. I knew her, but not on a sudden. Even when I was intuitively certain it was she, I was so unwilling to believe it, that I stared again and again at her in the hope that distance had made the face deceptive. When I could no longer doubt, I was seized with a fright. If she were to know *I* had seen her, what would be the consequence ?

It was easily guessed. She would invent on the spot some reason for dismissing me, and I should have to go. Such a measure I could not contemplate without terror. I was perfectly certain that my aunt would not receive me back, and refused a character, as I should be by Mrs. Merton, how should I procure another situation?

By the way they remained standing, it seemed not improbable but that they would shortly leave the recess. Stimulated by this apprehension, I rose, crawled out of their sight round the angle of the Gap, and made rapidly up the steep and rock-encumbered incline.

CHAPTER IX.

THE HOUSEKEEPER LEAVES.

I WAS greatly pained and distressed by what I had seen, and fell into deep reflection as I walked home. I made no doubt whatever that the gentleman Mrs. Morton was with was Captain Fowler. It was not at all improbable that the beach was their constant place of assignation, and my recess the hole they hid themselves in when they were afraid of prying eyes. I remembered now that very often Mrs. Merton had met me in the hall when I was going out with Laura, and asked me where I meant to walk. The question was always put with such an air of indifference, and with so much of her usual contemptuous manner, that it no more excited my suspicion than had she desired me to tell her the hour, or bid me see what a fine or cloudy day it

was. Now I understood what her curiosity signified.

I was exceedingly shocked and distressed. I thought of little Laura, and of the cruel shadow that overlies the future, the character of the girl—however pure, however true, however innocent—whose mother has made herself infamous. I thought of Mr. Merton. I was sure that he had not the least idea how very wicked his wife was—how wicked, I mean, outside that characteristic wickedness to which her displays of temper had accustomed him; and his ignorance made his position singularly pathetic to me.

But could I put him on his guard? Could I tell him what I had seen? In the passion, the shame, the misery my communication would carry with it, he would be incapable of caution; he would drag me forward to charge his wife with her wickedness. And after?

The household would be broken up, and I might be quite certain that Ashleigh Manor would know me no more.

Of course I am prepared to be told that no considerations of self-interest should have prevented me from denouncing the unfaithful wife to her husband. Honour, truth, loyalty, are everybody's concern; and for their sakes

everybody should be prepared to suffer. Were I to go through such an experience now, I should act as I ought then to have acted; done my duty to the man whose bread I was eating, whose money I was taking, by boldly telling him the truth—boldly pointing his wife out to him as a wretch who was bringing down shame and sorrow upon him and his child, and defied Fortune in my championship of Right.

But—I was young, I had only just entered on my lease of liberty; the gain procured by my industry was sweet to me. I looked back upon the past, and my heart turned sick with the knowledge that my candour might oblige me to solicit a temporary asylum in a house I abhorred.

The life I led at Ashleigh Manor was so calm, so pleasant, so profitable to me both in the present and for the future, that I had not the courage to put an end to it, vehemently as I was urged by my conscience to declare what I had seen to Mr. Merton.

Yet though I resolved to hold my tongue, I felt that I should never be able to look at Mrs. Merton again without a feeling of disgust and horror that might betray me. When I reflected upon the splendour of her home,

upon the sweetness and beauty of her little child, upon the character of her husband; when I considered that there was hardly a wish which could enter her heart beyond her power to gratify; I was amazed at the vileness of her behaviour. There was no theory I could hit on, however unflattering to her, which could supply me with a cause for the singular baseness of her unwomanly, unamiable character. That she had no heart I had seen from the very beginning of my acquaintance with her. Her child was positively nothing to her. Her husband appeared hateful in her sight, a presence that stirred, roused, infuriated her, as some objects excite mad people. Her treatment of the servants was unspeakably offensive; yet heartless, cruel, selfish as she was, I might still have considered that the very qualities which made her nature odious, would have preserved her from the commission of more noxious and overwhelming sins.

I reached Ashleigh Manor greatly agitated by my thoughts. On gaining my sitting-room, I found it unoccupied. I went to the open window to cool my face, which was warm with the exercise I had taken, and saw Mr. Merton and Laura walking under the trees. The

father held his child's hand, and I was struck by the tenderness and beauty of the love the pair suggested.

I withdrew to my bedroom to remove my hat, and returned to the Red Room, where I knew Laura would not come for some time, as she would not guess I had entered from my walk. I sat near the window, but behind the curtain, as I did not wish them to see me, and watched them. I thought Mr. Merton looked very manly. Though but of the middle stature, he held himself erect to a degree that made him seem taller than he was; and the breadth of his shoulders, his clearly-lined features, and large head, gave indications of a physical and intellectual power which made you lose sight of his inches. From time to time Laura would let go his hand, and run to pick a flower shining on the smooth sward, with which she would return, and take his hand again. At my elevation I could not see his face, but I knew well enough the expression that always kindled there when he was with his child, and judged that it was not absent now, by the way in which he would stop and lovingly run his hand down her bright curls, and bow his head to speak to her and receive her smile.

They made, indeed, a moving and delightful picture, though to me it was filled with pathos by contrast with the sight that had shocked me on the beach. It speaks well for a man to be tenderly attached to his child. I could not look upon those two, hand in hand, without feeling sure that Mr. Merton had a good heart. Many men would have visited the sins of the mother upon the child, and have found the innocent one as distasteful as the guilty. But there was no such inhuman application of prejudice in Mr. Merton. His love for Laura made me sometimes think that there must still exist a kind of tenderness in his heart for his wife, in spite of her diligent efforts to make him detest her. How could he look at his little pet-lamb, as he called Laura, without a gentleness mingling with his thoughts of the being that had borne her? Whilst this wronged husband loved his child so, there was always a chance given to Mrs. Merton to renew in his heart the emotion that had brought him to her feet. Laura would stand between her and him, and express her mother with a sweetness and innocence that must ever serve to keep the dim light of love for his wife alive in his heart. There would be subtle tones of the mother in the child's voice,

dreamlike hints of the mother's spirit in her eyes, suggestions in her infantile actions and attitudes of the graces which had enslaved him twelve years before, seen and heard by the keen and delicate sympathy no stranger could have possessed, which must operate on him like ever-tender, ever-recurring appeals. I considered that if he hated his wife, the memories and suggestions of her mother which the little creature expressed, would have revolted him as mocking renewals of the character he found baleful. But loving Laura as he did, her suggestions of her mother must be an endless source of gentle inspirations which would keep his heart softened towards his wife, and give her a promise of faithful, enduring love whenever she should come forward, reclaimed and repentant to demand its fulfilment.

But how little did he know of the deep dishonour that was being done him! of the cruel, fateful scene that had pictured itself in my eyes!

I could hear his softened tones addressing his child. With what unimaginable fury would my disclosure fill them!

Twelve years had inured him to the conduct of his wife; her feverish presence had made

itself a habit; in her absence he could laugh, and even be gay.

But tell him the treachery these twelve years had consummated!

Now, he divined nothing, feared nothing. Hear the pleasant laugh he sends up as Laura, running in pursuit of some bright insect, falls unhurt along the velvet grass. That laugh rises from a heart in which dwell no direr terrors of his wife than such as she can inspire with her mad tongue and wild fits of passion.

True, he has had the name of Captain Fowler flung at him many a time and oft, if credence is to be vouchsafed to Wakefield; but these remarks he has thought mere insults, designed only to enrage him, and as baseless as those other bitter insults her fury loves to heap upon him. Low as his opinion is of his wife, she still, in his sight, preserves her purity. His mind, perhaps, is too loyal, too honourable to descend to suspicions that affect her chastity. Was I not told that she coolly swears to him that she never meets, never speaks to Captain Fowler? The solemn assurance would satisfy a heart that goes forth to encounter the denial half way.

But I must drop my speculations, for there is a knock at the door.

"Come in."

It is Mrs. Saunders.

"I beg your pardon for intruding," she said; "but as I am leaving at six o'clock, I thought I'd just step in to see if you were here, and wish you good-bye."

"Leaving!" I exclaimed. "You do not mean to say that you are going away for good?"

"I am, indeed," she answered. "I had a desperate quarrel with Mrs. Merton this morning. Didn't you hear of it?"

"Not a word."

"Well, you're out of the way here; but if you had been in the west wing, you'd have heard noise enough to imagine that the roof was falling in."

"Take a chair, Mrs. Saunders," said I kindly; for the worthy woman's face was pale, and there was a scared look on it, though she tried to carry her trouble with a careless air.

She seated herself, and folded her hands on her lap.

"The reason of the quarrel," she exclaimed, "is so ridiculous, that I'm ashamed to name it. As I was crossing the gallery, in the west wing, you know, where Mrs. Merton's bed-

room is, I happened to kick my foot against the mat outside her bedroom door. Just as I did this, out she stepped. She cast her eyes down, noticed the mat, which I was going to set straight with my foot, if she hadn't trod on it and stood there, and cried sharply, 'Whose awkwardness is this?' 'I kicked it by accident just now, ma'am,' I said. Would you believe me, miss, she began to abuse me! She told me that I wasn't of any use in her house. She told me," she continued, warming up, and flushing at the recollection of the indignities with which she had been overwhelmed—"she told me that I was *dirty* and *lazy*—dirty, lazy, and *useless!* that I was setting a bad example to the rest of the servants, and I don't know what besides. All because I happened to kick my foot by accident against her door-mat. Would you believe that there was such a fearful woman in the world?"

"Mad! she *must* be mad!" I ejaculated.

"She put me in quite as great a passion as she was in. I never thought I should have had the courage, but I *did* give it her! I told her that I wouldn't stop in her house another day, not if she were to go on her bended knees; and then I gave it her. I

knew the servants would hear me, and come up and listen under the gallery, and so did she, and that made her wild. But I didn't care. I told her that she wasn't fit to have a house of her own; that she would never keep a servant; that she had a foul tongue; that everybody hated her. Oh, and ever so much more! You should have seen her, miss! She lifted her hand. I declare if she had struck me I would have rushed at her; for I am as strong as she is, I dare say, and nobody shall hit *me!*"

"You astonish me! I only wonder you could stoop to say more to her than to tell her you meant to leave."

"That's what I ought to have done, I dare say. But there was a good many weeks' thinking on my mind, and I wanted to let her know what I thought of her; and then the servants were listening. Think of her calling me dirty and useless! Me, who came to her with a ten years' character from a high family, which I left only because they were going abroad, and I could be of no use to them! Dirty and useless! She's the dirty and useless one. Look at her bedroom in the morning. It is all three servants' work to make it tidy within the hour. She throws

everything about, drops things on the floor, being too lazy to put them back where she took them from. Oh, she's a dreadful woman! I pity Wakefield. She will be the death of that girl some of these days. If Jane wasn't an orphan without friends, I would beg and pray of her not to sleep another night in this house. Mark my words, miss, some of these days Mrs. Merton will kill Jane Wakefield."

"I am sorry enough for poor Jane, who seems a most respectable, quiet girl. But I pity Mr. Merton and Miss Laura more than anybody else."

"And well you may, miss; though as for Miss Laura, I don't think she suffers very much, being mostly with you, and seeing very little of her mamma. But I'm truly sorry for Mr. Merton, who's a real gentleman, kind and obliging to everybody. Jane says it is truly shocking the way Mrs. Merton flies at him. Though I have not been here very long, I have seen enough to curdle the blood in one's veins. I don't think Mrs. Merton would stop at murder. Jane Wakefield will go first. I'm sure of that, though I haven't told the poor thing so; for what is she to do? She hasn't a ten years' character like me to

carry about with her. She's dependent on Mrs. Merton. It's all very shocking; and I shan't feel easy till I've put twenty mile between me and that fierce creature."

"I am very sorry you are going, Mrs. Saunders. I have to thank you for many acts of kindness done me by you since I have been here."

"Never mention them, miss. I hope you'll be able to get on with Mrs. Merton better than I have. You'd best keep well out of her way. She's a mad cow, as needs a clear street."

She rose, and I gave her my hand. The act of parting has a levelling influence, perhaps because it is a dim suggestion of death. She went away, and I saw her no more. But she had fulfilled her mission, so far as I was concerned, by supplying me with one more illustration of Mrs. Merton's terrible character.

CHAPTER X.

MRS. MERTON TRIES ON A NEW DRESS.

I HAVE not given you a regular narrative of such evenings as I passed in the drawing-room with Mrs. Merton, because I have no particular wish to deform this story with more illustrations of that lady's manner and character than I can help. You would think it, I fear, a tedious business to have to read the timid words I used to address to her, terrified out of my wits lest I should say something to offend; nor could you find much pleasure in descriptions of Laura's subdued whispers and frightened glances, and in the fits of passion which would on a sudden take Mrs. Merton, and for such insignificant, for such groundless reasons, as would make you suspect my veracity were I to set them down.

Mrs. Merton's character, indeed, would, I

foresaw, cost me more trouble perhaps than any other part of the story. The delineation of moderate vices, like that of moderate virtues, will, even in unskilful hands, carry with it a tolerable air of verisimilitude. But an essentially wicked, like an essentially noble character, is, on the whole, so much out of the range of ordinary experience, that to make it appear possible—to make the motives of its actions adequate to the vileness of the actions—it is necessary to surround it with conditions which shall account for its behaviour, and make it probable, and even necessary, to the most superficial reader. Any departure from the level preserved by human nature in its virtues and transgressions, risks the charge of exaggeration. Extraordinary bad people are quite as rare as extraordinary good people; and though there, no doubt, are extraordinary bad people in this world, the infrequency of their occurrence in every-day experience should make an author pause before he sits down to elaborate the description of a character which perhaps not more than one out of every five hundred readers shall admit to be credible.

In my case, however, I am not inventing a fable, but narrating an experience—such an

experience as I doubt not the annals of crime will readily corroborate for any reader who may question my sincerity. You must believe me when I assure you that Mrs. Merton was a worse woman than I can describe her. I might make her commit the most desperate villanies, but that would not prove that she had no heart. The most infamous woman may preserve certain virtues, down-trodden and crushed in her soul, but still living. I am at the pains to recall Mrs. Merton's character and consider it narrowly, and can witness nothing to make me say she was not wholly bad.

What words are there to describe the sneer, the glance, the light up-raising of the eyebrows, the faint toss of the head, which may be distincter revelations of a bad and malignant nature than any language could convey?

I have seen Mrs. Merton express more hate of her husband by one look she has given him than were she to have talked to him for an hour. I have seen her harden her face into a greater insult than any abuse she could have poured out.

Her behaviour was rendered aggressive by its contrasts.

When, for instance, she was alone with us in the evening, it might be her humour not to speak. She would sit sullen and sulky as if she were a bitterly wronged woman, poring over some Rosa-Mahldaish novel, and answer only after long and irritating pauses the questions her husband might ask her. Or it might happen that she would be in a garrulous mood. Taking no heed of the presence of her husband and child, she would address herself to me and endeavour by stealthy but copious talk to provoke me into flattering her. But let her husband offer to join in the conversation; let Laura say something when she was speaking, the effect was disastrous; the semblance of good temper which made me hopeful of a quiet evening would vanish; her passion would boil up and a war of words be the result.

But now mark; however sulky, or however passionate she might be with us—and by us, I mean Mr. Merton, Laura, and myself—no sooner did the hall bell peal, no sooner was the door opened and a visitor admitted, than the tempest would cease or the sullenness dissolve; she would grow sprightly, loquacious, agreeable, thereby offering us—or let me rather say offering Mr. Merton—as direct and

well-defined an insult as it is possible for a wife to level at her husband.

But what was hardly less astonishing than *her* character, was *his* patience. Had I not watched him shrewdly, I should have considered that her outbreaks no more affected him than the clamouring of an enraged child would have done. There was a set expression upon his face at such times which might easily have been mistaken for a smile; but wrapped up in it was an air of grimness which made it look forced and insincere, like the air of a resolute man under a painful operation. Yet this did not qualify his suggestion of patience, if it made it menacing.

On the evening of the day on which I had seen Mrs. Merton and the man I presumed to be Captain Fowler together, I felt a strong repugnance to adjourning as usual to the drawing-room. The dislike and fear I had all along felt towards her were now ripened into disgust. I also deprecated the sense of hypocrisy which I was sure would possess me when I conversed with her. My conscience kept on reasoning that it was my duty to tell Mr. Merton what I had seen; and because I had not the courage to obey its dictates it threatened to make me feel like a hypocrite.

It was idle, however, to invent an excuse for not going to the drawing-room. The apology that would hold good for one evening would be of no use for another; and it would profit me nothing to evade the disagreeable duty for one night only.

I was pondering the matter and wondering whether the expression of my wish to stay away from the drawing-room would provoke Mrs. Merton to quarrel with me when Mr. Merton came into the room. We had just finished tea. He sat down, exclaiming:

"Lorry and I have had a long afternoon together. Her active little legs have tired mine out."

"Shall I give you a cup of tea, papa?" asked Laura.

"Yes, I'll have one. But I suppose the tea is black and cold by this time."

"Indeed, then, the tea is very nice," said Laura, pouring out a cup with great gravity.

He looked at her admiringly and caressingly, and meeting my eyes, smiled. He took the cup, bending and kissing the little hand that proffered it with a kind of frolicsome grace. After sipping the tea, he said:

"This simple beverage is potent enough, Miss Malcolmson, to renew in me memories

which are over thirty years old. There you have the real use of *flavour*. No wonder men leave water alone: it is tasteless: it recalls nothing: it inspires nothing."

"I don't think tea is very inspiriting," I said with a smile.

"No—it has a tendency to depress me just now. Drinking it here, sitting in this chair, looking on these pictures, on those red-velvet chairs, I am transported back thirty years. Six times five years. It is a long time. Think of five years hence, Lorry, and then reflect that you must go over that period six times to reach thirty. In this room, Miss Malcolmson, thirty years ago, I used to do what Laura is now doing: learn my lessons, and take my meals with a resident tutor."

"You seem to think it a long time ago, sir. Most people who talk of the past, look back as if the time had fled too swiftly to please them."

"It seems a long time to me, because I look back upon a blank. Nothing is more suggestive of distance than a fog. Lorry, your tea is excellent. Is it yours or Miss Malcolmson's brewing."

"Miss Malcolmson's."

"If I had known you were so dexterous at

the most difficult of domestic arts, Miss Malcolmson, you would have had me calling unceremoniously about tea-time before now. Not one woman in a thousand knows how to make a cup of tea. You must teach Lorry the trick that your memory may be gratefully celebrated in future years by her husband."

"Who will be my husband, papa?"

"A very fine fellow. I have him in my eye. Some of these days when you grow old enough, I will bring him home in my pocket."

"In your pocket! He must be a tiny little man, and I won't marry him."

"Oh, you will when you see him. He is small indeed, but his shape is wonderfully elegant. And he dresses most ravishingly, in a chocolate-coloured coat, a gilt stripe down his pantaloons, a cocked hat adorned with a gilt tassel, and gold buttons. Talk of tags, feathers, and martial splendour! Here is a finer dressed gentleman than any officer in the army, and what is truly surprising is, though he hasn't an ounce more brains than most men in uniform have, he is absolutely destitute of self-conceit. His nose is perhaps a little too long, though I pledge you my honour he doesn't come from the Holy Land. I like his nose being long, for it will allow you to

shape it into the form you most prefer—Roman, Snub, Grecian, Hooked, or Chinese. But the real merit of this little gentleman is, if ever you should feel hungry you can eat him up."

"Oh I couldn't, I couldn't eat up a man."

"Couldn't you? then you'll differ from the majority of your sex."

"But no girl eats up men?" said Laura, earnestly.

"Oh yes, very often; that is, they eat up the better part of them—their hearts. You see girls are refined cannibals. They devour the tit-bit and leave the rest for such birds of prey as choose to collect. But you can eat up your man, cocked hat and all. He is a charming little beau, made of gingerbread."

Laura pouted. Mr. Merton laughed pleasantly, and turning to me, said:

"What is your opinion of gingerbread gentlemen for husbands?"

"I don't think that they would agree with me, sir."

"Oh yes. Better than flesh and blood. Anything agrees with one better than that. I often think it would be very pleasant if we could realise some of the fairy tales that young folks delight in. There's a German story of a young king who married the prin-

cess of Sugar-candy land. They lived very happily together for some months, and then they quarrelled. On which his Majesty ate her up and bestowed his royal hand and heart on the young Queen of the Land of Cakes—not Scotland, Miss Malcolmson. This young lady was made of the very finest flour, deliciously flavoured, and with the most lovely sugar-plums in her face for eyes. Her teeth were the whitest almonds. But she was a bit of a shrew. I am afraid the manufacturers had flavoured her too strongly with some sort of essential oil. Be this as it may, his Majesty breakfasted off her. Now I think this an excellent way of getting rid of troublesome spouses. See what a lot of trouble it saves! No divorces, no lawyers, no delays, no odious publicity, no cynical compassionating friends. 'Madam,' cries the aggrieved husband, sternly, 'I regret to find that you and I don't get on very well together. I am disappointed to discover that the butter which forms a portion of your composition is rather rancid. Those beautiful teeth of yours, too, I perceive now, are made of bitter almonds. Such being the case, and being keenly aware of the duty I owe to myself, I regret to say that I have no other alternative but to dine off you.' So saying

he devours her. I suppose that would be the way Captain Cook's murderers put an end to their termagant wives?"

"Why don't you eat up mamma, then?" said Laura, who had been listening very gravely to her father's discourse. "I am sure you and she don't get on together."

"I am waiting, my dear, till the doctor prescribes me an acid. The first time I am attacked with rheumatism I will have her for dinner."

I was not very well pleased to hear Laura laugh out at this. Had she been older she would have been more scared than amused; for there was a grimness in his levity that made it curiously disagreeable.

He fixed his eyes steadfastly on my face as if he wished to read my thoughts. Had he questioned me, I am pretty sure I should have told him it was unwise and unfair to say anything that tended to degrade the mother lower in her child's estimation than she had already fallen by her own behaviour.

Yet even as I felt this I remembered what I had seen that morning from the beach; and the recollection forced me to admit that compared with the truth, there was nothing the father could say that would lower the wife to

the point of baseness to which she herself had stooped.

Laura happened to leave the room just then. I knew Mr. Merton would soon be going; and perhaps urged to speak by the opportunity Laura's absence gave me, as much as by the thoughts which were then in my mind, I said, very respectfully,

"I was thinking of asking you, sir, whether it is needful that Laura and I should continue the practice of going to the drawing-room during the evening?"

"What makes you ask that? don't you enjoy the visit?"

"It is a change, sir; but Laura and I could amuse ourselves very well here."

"You would have no beautiful music here; no beautiful singing."

"I don't think Laura cares very much for music."

"And how about the quarrelling? Could you dispense with a condiment that can hardly fail to give your daily experience a relish?"

"It is a condiment that it would be better to keep Laura from tasting."

"You are putting it all on Laura. But you have a more personal objection, have you not?"

I thought I had best be frank. He was

very downright himself, and might misconstrue any evasions.

"You can understand, sir, that Mrs. Merton's temper gives me pain. I grieve for her and for you when I see her lose all self-control."

"Of course you are pained; of course you are grieved. I don't say my friends are. I think a good many drop in as they would to a theatre, just for the fun of witnessing a matrimonial row. You see that Mrs. Merton behaves politely and hospitably to them. We,—the insufferable conditions of her daily life,—we, child, husband, companion, the heavy taxes on her noble patience, we are the wretches on whom she vents her well-bred spleen. I am often sorry for you, I confess. I very frequently wish you were out of the room when she is regaling me with one of her astounding philippics. But are you not used to her yet? I should have fancied you were. I am! Ah, to be sure I have had twelve years of it—you about twelve weeks."

"But do you think it desirable that Laura should witness her mother's outbreaks?"

"I think it desirable that Laura should witness her father's patience, lest the tender

and truthful world which always takes the woman's part—and I am willing that it should, though are not men the weaker sex?—lest the world, I say, should tell her that it was all her father's fault? 'Your papa, my dear, could not have treated your mother well, or she would never have been so bad-tempered as she was. Depend upon it, all unknown to yourself and to us, your papa made your mother suffer bitter troubles. She was too faithful a wife to speak the truth, and denounce him to her friends, but lived inside her own misery until she grew morbid and bad-tempered. No, no! be quite sure that your father was very much, if not wholly, to blame.' That's how the world lectures, philosophises, theorises, Miss Malcolmson. But my child shall see and judge the truth for herself, at any expense of suffering to her and me."

I could not agree with him, but I hardly felt at liberty to enter into an argument.

"Besides," he continued, "the very pain her mother's behaviour gives Laura will make more profitable the lesson that is taught her. I see no sign of Mrs. Merton's character in her as yet—I would rather be struck blind on the spot than witness it!—but if the hereditary devil (for Mrs. Merton's mother was as pas-

sionate as the daughter) should ever manifest itself in Laura, the memory of what she now daily beholds in her mother will repress, and may kill the fiend."

"But the lesson might not produce this effect, sir. You must remember that there is something contaminating in bad temper. Mrs. Merton's temper instead of benefitting, may aggravate——"

"I have stated my opinions," he interrupted, with just a tinge of haughtiness in his manner.

Almost immediately afterwards he smiled, as if apologising for his tone of command, and added,

"I like to have Laura with me in the drawing-room. To be sure, I could join you here; but that might vex Mrs. Merton, and we must deal tenderly with her prejudices. I don't choose that my wife's temper should banish my pet away from me. This room, indeed, is cheerful enough, but the road to it is mighty gloomy. I should not be satisfied to sit in my gay drawing-room and think of the dark dungeons which separate my child from me."

"I thoroughly understand your feelings," I said; "I hope you will forgive me for

having expressed any reluctance to accompany Laura."

"There is nothing to forgive. If I were in your place I dare say I should fight hard against these compulsory visits. And yet you seem to get on pretty well with Mrs. Merton. What is the secret? silence? reserve? A capacity of saying agreeable things at the right moments? Perhaps you are a student of human nature."

At this moment Laura returned. He rose with a glance at the clock.

"You will join us at the usual time, Miss Malcolmson," he said, significantly; and patting Laura's cheek as he passed her, he went away.

As I heard his footsteps echoing along the passage, I thought to myself, "What would his feelings be were I to tell him what I had seen this morning!"

I felt so indignant with Mrs. Merton for the vile part she was playing that, now the hour for repairing to the drawing-room was come, I hated the notion of meeting her.

I said to Laura when she was with me in my bedroom,

"Do you know a gentleman who used to visit here called Captain Fowler?"

"Yes," she answered. "He is a bad man, papa says."

"What sort of a looking person is he?"

The child's ideas were too unformed to enable her to give me his description, so I had to question her.

"Is he a tall man?"

"Yes, taller than papa."

"Has he a beard and moustache?"

"Yes, a long beard and a hooked nose. Mamma used to say that he was very handsome; but papa doesn't like him, and I don't either."

"Why don't you like him?"

"Because papa doesn't. But that's not my only reason. He does not seem a nice man. He frowned when he spoke, and when he laughed I longed to run away from him."

"But, poor man, perhaps he can't help frowning; and his laugh needn't be his fault either. If I were to give you a Jew's-harp to play on, you would think it very hard if I were not to like you because you couldn't make the Jew's-harp sound like a real harp."

"Oh, well, he isn't a nice man," she answered, quite at a loss to give expression to her instincts of dislike, which in a child are far more

unerring than they are in older people, and seeking refuge in a vague but safe objection.

Her answers satisfied me that the man I had seen with Mrs. Merton was Captain Fowler. I had little doubt of it from the first, but I had wanted to make sure; for had her companion not proved the captain, the indiscretion of her conduct might have found a softening explanation.

When we entered the drawing-room we found that Mrs. Merton had not left the dinner-table. When presently she entered, she came up to me, and without taking any notice of her child, exclaimed,

"Miss Malcolmson, are you any judge of dress?"

"I think I can tell a handsome dress when I see it, madam."

"Then come with me. I want you to see me try on a dress, and tell me honestly how it fits. Mr. Merton is no judge of style," she said, slightly glancing at Laura; "and Wakefield's notions are too provincial to be relied on."

Saying which she walked to the door, meaning me to follow her. I wished heartily that she had left me alone. My business was with Laura, not with her dresses. I was ter-

ribly afraid of committing myself in some way or other, and looked entreatingly at Laura, as a hint for her to come with me, because I felt that her presence would serve me as a kind of support. But Laura would not stir; indeed, from the fact of her mother having barely noticed her, it was plain that her company was not wanted.

I followed Mrs. Merton through the hall and up the very handsome staircase that conducted to the gallery. I had never been in this part of the house before, and was struck by the noble style and elegant finish of the doors, the walls, the rails of the balustrade, the bronze lamps suspended at each end of the gallery. The doors were of oak, with elaborate brass handles; the ceiling was fretted; the flooring was solid as the deck of a man-of-war. There were several pictures upon the wall, apparently of great antiquity. One picture I particularly remember—representing Venus leading Cupid and the Graces to see Vulcan forging arrows for Cupid; Vulcan, who is lame, rests his knee on a wooden leg. There were ten figures, and the drawing and the colouring of the whole were admirable. This piece was signed Veronese. There were two rows of pictures, and the

upper row was wholly composed of portraits, many no doubt representing the Merton family. Indeed, when I come to consider the construction and furniture of Ashleigh Manor, I often think that even Mr. Beckford would not have disdained to borrow some hints from it for his noble Fonthill Abbey. From the hall the gallery appeared to contain but four doors; but when I had entered it, I observed that there were six; one at each extremity leading, as I afterwards got to know, into a suite of rooms extending over the drawing-room on the one side, and over the library and dining-room on the other. In short, there appeared no end to the accommodation offered by this fine, old, rambling building.

Mrs. Merton walked to the centre door in her quick impatient way, and flung it open. She made sure that I would admire the coup d'œil of the room, for she paused and looked at me as I entered.

"This is my bedroom," said she; "Mr. Merton's is the third door on the right."

I gazed around upon one of the most delightful rooms that could be imagined. The floor was carpeted with a thick velvet-pile; the bedstead was of brass, an antique piece of furniture, richly and curiously moulded beyond

the dreams of modern industry. The fittings of the room were to the full as elegant in their way as those of the drawing-room. The tall windows were draped with blue velvet curtains, embroidered with gold lace. The chairs were covered with the same material. Over the mantelpiece and around the walls were tall mirrors, like steel, set in those massive, but clumsy gilt frames which an improved taste in upholstery has wisely consigned to limbo. Yet, though the furniture appeared to be tolerably antique, there was nothing dingy about it, no suggestion of the wear and tear of second-hand shops, and of here and there a forgotten auctioneer's ticket pasted on a leg or a back. Had I felt more at my ease with Mrs. Merton I should have given vent to the expression of delight and pleasure this handsome and charming room excited in me, for its beauties were not easily exhausted; turn where the eye would, some costly trifle, some handsome wardrobe, some exquisite little table would renew my pleasurable wonder; whilst through an open door I could see other rooms stretching beyond, which, I could not doubt, were as well furnished as the one I was in.

Mrs. Merton allowed my admiration but a

very brief exercise. Going to a bell she pulled it sharply, and walked to a toilet glass before which burned four candles. Did any patron saint, by the way, ever receive more dedicatory candles than the St. Beauty whose features beam upon us from our toilet-glasses?

In a very few moments Wakefield came hurrying in, not through the gallery door, but through the back rooms, whence I concluded that the apartments overhead communicated by a back stairs with Mrs. Merton's.

When the young girl came near enough to the candles for me to see her face, I noticed that her eyes were swollen with tears, and that her cheeks and forehead were the colour of snow. Mrs. Merton seemed to pay no heed to her appearance, but ordered her, after the manner she usually employed in addressing the servants, to bring the new satin dress. Wakefield entered the next room and returned bearing a large card box, which she set down on a chair, and proceeded to take from it a blue satin dress, the flounces of which were embroidered with silver lace, producing an effect which some persons might have thought very fine, but which, I must

confess, I found too theatrical and bizarre for my sober views.

"I wish to try that dress on," said Mrs. Merton to her maid. "I want Miss Malcolmson's opinion. Yours is of no use. You can sew neatly, but you have no taste."

Wakefield fell to unhooking the body of her mistress's dress without a word. I watched her closely and was struck by the odd mixture of terror and melancholy suggested by her manner towards Mrs. Merton. Had she been a slave on whom Mrs. Merton was privileged to use the lash or any other instrument of torture, she could not have been more spiritlessly active—more listlessly energetic. These terms, contradictory as they appear, precisely convey the impression her manner produced upon me. She seemed galvanised by fear. She was quick and jerky, sudden, vigilant, always uneasy. I judged that her suppressed tremors would make her find Mrs. Merton a harder task-mistress than were she less nimble but more defiant. She fretted the passionate woman by a nervous anxiety to please; and the almost degraded subjection her behaviour implied was positively an excuse for Mrs. Merton to exercise tyranny.

Sincerely from my heart did I pity the girl. Here in less than half-an-hour I saw Mrs. Merton display more temper than another mistress, however impatient, would think fit to exhibit to her attendant in a month. And this, I thought, is the treatment unfortunate Jane Wakefield has to endure every day in the year, from eleven in the morning to any hour at night! It is enough to drive her mad. What a timid fool she must be to remain! Surely she could find a situation elsewhere, if she would only be at the pains to seek for one.

But the satin dress was now on, and I was called upon with a very ruffling peremptoriness, to give my opinion.

What was I to say? Should I damn with faint praise? Hint that the costume was very fit for a masquerade, but rather too striking for a polite assembly? Upon my word! I could almost sympathize with Wakefield's ridiculous fears when I found Mrs. Merton's black eyes gleaming upon mine whilst she waited for an answer. What use in my being candid?

"I think," said I, "that the dress is wonderfully handsome."

"Yes, yes," cried she, "I could have told you that; but how about the fit?"

"The fit is perfect," which indeed it was.

"It is my taste—not the material, but the make," she exclaimed with a swelling air of triumph, flinging the long train out behind her, and strutting like a tragedy-queen before the cheval glass. "Satin and silver are all the rage now in town. Of course you will like me better when you see me in my turban. The finer the dress, the greater is the need for the finishings."

"Oh yes, that is so indeed," said I.

"Long waists are becoming the mode again," she continued, constantly gazing at herself, and only shifting her eyes from the glass to give me a victorious stare; "I am glad of that, for the figure with any pretensions to a handsome shape must be spoiled by those ugly sacks whose waists begin under the armpits. Long waists and long trains are your only good style. Anything else is very fit for servants."

"Whoever made that dress seems well acquainted with the mode."

"Thanks to me. A more foolish woman never lived, but I sent the dress back so many times that I think I've worked her into good

sense at last. When it came home it was too wide in the back. I sent it away, and the idiot in taking it in in the back, made it too tight across the chest. Just what I had been told to expect from our hoyden dressmakers, who imagine that the only type of figure prevalent is that of the scarecrows they are accustomed to see in their father's and brother's fields. When it came back again, something else wanted altering. And so it went on. I fancy my lady thought she could tire me out; if so, she was enormously mistaken. I am wonderfully patient in giving trouble to fools. Now, tell me frankly, do you think the dress can be improved? If so, back it shall go for the eighth time."

"It seems to me a very perfect fit."

"And what do you say?" she cried, turning imperiously on Wakefield. "But," she added contemptuously, "I have told you you have no taste. So there's no use in getting your opinion."

The girl looked at me piteously. But I was so much annoyed by her cowed air that I would not appear to notice her.

Mrs. Merton then began to walk about the room, desiring me to stand at a distance and give my opinion on the full effect of the dress

when viewed as it would be in a large room. I cannot tell you how ridiculous she made herself with her languishing airs, her sweeping strides, the towering glances she bestowed on herself each time she passed the glass. She looked as though she were rehearsing for some private theatricals; and I am not sure that the rehearsal of the part of a vain woman would have justified the intolerable conceit she carried herself with. Had I known less of her than I did, I should have found the spectacle entertaining enough; but my acquaintance with her real character, and my knowledge of a fact which everybody but myself was ignorant of, made me see something too tragical and vicious in her impersonation of the part of a proud lady to divert me.

After she had done coquetting with herself, she began with a love of contradiction which I must own I have not found peculiar to her alone, to find fault with the dress which she had just commended. The train was not long enough; the body was not cut about the neck as she liked it; the sleeves came too low over the shoulders.

Whether she complained in the hope of provoking Wakefield and me into compli-

menting her or not, I can't say; but if such were her intention she missed her aim, for Wakefield agreed in what she said, and I was silent. In truth I was so much offended by the immoderate vanity of this, to me, by no means handsome woman, that had my position just then depended upon my flattering her, I should have sacrificed it by holding my tongue.

Who was she to claim my homage? Waiving all considerations of her character and confining myself wholly to her appearance, her manners, her conversation, and her antecedents, I was every bit as good as she, and in my own estimation, a good deal better. She had more money than I; but as to money, thank God, the scales of society are not to be adjusted by that weight. What right had she to expect me to flatter her? The flatterer is flattering in another sense than that of the compliments he makes; for whether he be in earnest or not, he proves by his words that he thinks the person he flatters considerable enough to burn some incense before. To claim flattery is to presuppose superiority. I would not consider Mrs. Merton my superior in any sense. I was younger than she; I was better-looking than she; I

would have made a thousand-fold better wife than she; and a better mother too. If I could not afford to tell her the truth, I could at least preserve my dignity by silence. All the flattery she received from me consisted in my telling her that her dress fitted; which was true, and therefore no flattery. I might even have assured her that her dress became her, and have still held by the truth; for I must own that the blue and the silver, and the regal train and the low body, suited admirably the brilliant eyes and white throat and tragical carriage of this uncomfortable woman.

"There!" cried she, halting before me with a thoroughly dramatic full stop—a shower of bouquets would have greeted the action on the stage, "you are satisfied with my dress and I will not detain you any longer from Laura."

I bowed and was precipitately making for the door, delighted to escape on such easy terms, when she called out,

"Are you a judge of hair-dressing, Miss Malcolmson?"

"I am not," I answered, pausing in my headlong flight.

"What are you a judge of, pray?" she asked with a sneer.

It would not have been difficult to return a

smart answer to such a question; but I remembered my station and diffidently replied,

"I am afraid, madam, that my powers of criticism are limited to my vocation—that is, to teaching."

Her only answer was an imperious nod, which oppressive salute I acknowledged with another bow, and then quitted the room.

Mr. Merton was in the drawing-room when I returned. He was pointing out some fine engravings in a large volume to Laura. He looked over his shoulder as I went to my accustomed seat near the piano, and asked me with a half smile whether I admired Mrs. Merton's dress.

"I think it very elegant, sir."

"It is the fashion, I believe; but fashion is no proof of elegance."

Laura asked what the dress was.

"Cloth of gold," answered Mr. Merton, "inlaid with gems found in the heads of serpents and toads by a body of enterprising gentlemen who have formed a company for the purpose of ransacking dung-hills as well as reptiles for jewels. What do you say to that, Lorry?"

"Oh, papa, you will never answer my questions. Miss Malcolmson will tell me."

"Well then, it is satin—green is it or blue?" he asked of me.

"Blue, sir."

"Blue satin, my love, laced with silver of the value of about five respectable artisans' yearly gains. If it does not produce a startling effect on the first night it is worn, it will be discarded and buried deep in the bosom of a wardrobe for the moths to batten on. That would be a pity. So much silver and satin shouldn't be wasted. What a fine gentleman they would make of me! My tailor should fashion me a waistcoat of the satin, and I would put the silver in my pocket; and thus accomplished I should be fit company for the highest nobleman in the land."

"Did mamma look well in it?" asked Laura, with that curiosity in the matter of dress which comes to girls with their milk-teeth and outlasts their hair.

"Very well indeed," I answered; "it fits her superbly, and shows off her figure excellently."

"I'm glad of that," said Mr. Merton, gravely. "There may now be a chance for the dressmaker to get over the pulmonary complaint into which her misfits and mistakes have hurried her. Did you admire fervently, Miss Malcolmson?"

"No, sir, complacently," I answered, laughing.

"And yet you live! upon my word you have an excellent knack of combining conscience with flattery. Teach me the art. I am often called upon to admire, but invariably praise too much or not enough."

"My receipt is simple enough," I said. "Speak the truth."

"And shame the devil. Eh! but the devil has claws, and though candour is good, a whole skin is better. The fact is, I must go in for the study of dress-making. To praise a picture or a statue justly you should know something about painting and sculpture; and I don't see how you can criticise a dress if you don't know how it is made."

"Oh, papa, men needn't know how to make dresses," said Laura.

"Yes, yes; husbands should. I feel my ignorance. Though my judgment is disdained it is very often invited, and it is dangerous to blunder. I'd rather write a stupid book and have all the critics swarm upon me with their stings like a nest of wasps, than have my bosom pierced by the arrows of Mrs. Merton's eyes by making a mistake in my praise, Miss Malcolmson. You shall teach me to

admire. Shall we have a rehearsal on the spot? Oblige me by standing up and attitudinising as you have seen Mrs. Merton. Nay, do not look at the door. You need not fear her entrance for another hour. She is deep in her dresses and they will detain her."

There was an odd mixture of satire and seriousness, of earnestness and irony in his manner. But there was more hardness than levity. He seemed as though unable to conceal his contempt, but hoped to moderate its expression by dressing it in a frolicsome guise.

I hardly knew whether it would be quite becoming in me to fall into his humour, and burlesque Mrs. Merton. He perceived my reluctance, and said:

"Well, we will postpone the lesson to another day. But let me tell you I am in earnest in wishing to know how to admire dress correctly. Horace declared that not to admire was the only art he knew to make and keep men happy. But nil admirari won't do for ladies. Apart from the value of admiration, to me, as a claim upon Mrs. Merton's respect, I hold, as times go, that no man can consider himself accomplished who cannot discourse glibly in the language of the dress-

maker. Dress is the one subject on which all ladies can talk, and talk well. Girls who have never heard of Milton, and cannot be positive that Turkey is not in the Red Sea, will grow animated over a flounce or a wreath. Surely men who wish to pass well in society, ought not to remain ignorant of the one great topic on which all women are fluent."

"Men's knowledge of dress might prove useful in one way," I answered; "it would enable them to be very ironical, and by talking of nothing but dress, would make the subject so tiresome, that women would grow sick of it, and take pleasure in more intellectual conversation."

"Women grow sick of dress! Never! There is no irony that could restrain that delight. I suppose the most violent satire on man that exists is the monkey—as great a satire on man as man himself. You can tell how mankind feel the satire, by the disgust the monkey excites. We are horrified by their independent and liberal reproduction of ourselves. I was going to say, that could you conceive a colony of female monkies chattering on dress, adorning themselves, and giving themselves airs in satin and silver, and silk and lace, women, instead of profiting from

the irony of the example, would join the betailed throng, and chatter, envy, and exult with the best of them. Now I say that men, knowing the existence of this inordinate passion in women, ought to accommodate themselves to it by learning dressmaking. I will venture to say that there is many a young blockhead who cannot write a letter without deserving a flogging, who would pick up the dressmaker's lingo with ease, and in a very short time talk it to perfection. With this single accomplishment he might make his fortune. From women he would get more admiration than could he write poetry like Shakespeare, and declaim like Pitt. Many an heiress made haughty and stiff by the gold in her veins, to whom the language of romance and the eloquence of true love are as Greek, would lose her heart and capitulate on a sudden to the young fellow who could praise her attire in dressmaker's dialect, and engage her in an agreeable conversation on bustles, heels, hoops, bows, and gauzes."

"I am afraid, sir, that your opinion of our sex is not very flattering."

"It must be flattering, or I should not show so much ambition to please them. Of course my time is gone, and a knowledge of dress-

making would be of no use to me in a marrying sense. But considered with reference to my wife's temper, I should find it, I am sure, astonishingly valuable: and I have no doubt that the ladies whom I have the honour to meet in society would find me a thousand fold more entertaining and agreeable than I am if I could only talk to them comprehensibly on dress, and prove my enthusiasm by my boundless knowledge."

At this point the conversation was changed by Laura asking her father if Mrs. Saunders had gone.

"I believe so," he answered. "I am sorry. She was a very respectable woman, and knew her work."

"She seemed a very kind person," I said.

"Yes, but Mrs. Merton and she couldn't agree. We find our servants very troublesome, Miss Malcolmson," he continued, satirically. "We are constantly having to change them."

"Those you have now seem very respectful, well-trained, obliging, and prompt."

"Great virtues. But you lose sight of one unpardonable defect: they are flesh and blood. When you have an antipathy to flesh and blood, what is the use of its virtues?"

"Would you have wooden servants, papa?" asked Laura.

"Yes, automatons made of oak, that they might last long, and not be indented by the heel of the boot, or cut by the knife I might now and then have a fancy to fling at them. The drawback to flesh and blood is, it *will* have feelings. It is a great liberty to take with those who pay it and feed it for its services; and you can therefore appreciate our annoyance, Miss Malcolmson, when we see our servants suffering from our harsh words as if they were gentlemen and ladies."

"Very annoying, sir," I answered, thoroughly entering into his irony.

"I don't know how many housekeepers we have had since I married Mrs. Merton. My wife left the task of choosing them to me for the first few years; but I found out that the distribution of labour was rather unfairly made. I had all the work of selecting them; she the indolent task of quarrelling with and discharging them. So when our sixth housekeeper was packed off, I threw up my appointment, and left the duty of choosing the seventh to my wife. Mrs. Saunders was her choice. Has your mother told you that

she has engaged another housekeeper?" he asked Laura.

"No, papa."

"I am told that there is a very clever exhibition of wax-work figures in London. I am sure for a substantial premium, the owner of those dolls would allow one of them to come here as housekeeper. She would be certain to get on with Mrs. Merton. As our servants left us, we might fill their places with the remaining dolls. I should much enjoy my dinner, waited on by a wax footman. The beauty of such an arrangement would be, that any quarrels which took place in the drawing-room would remain unreported in the kitchen. We could always keep a supply of wax in the house to repair any damages that our temper might cause. If I knocked the footman down for instance, for taking the liberty to stumble over a door-mat, I could always mend his broken nose by holding him before the kitchen fire, and sticking a Grecian or a Roman on, according to my taste. Even if an eye came out, we could always put it in again. To be sure, Mrs. Merton might be jealous of the housemaids' complexions, and I might not like to see the footmen with bigger calves than mine. But such small grievances

could easily be rectified. We could colour the housemaids' cheeks to our taste, and one constable would be enough to hold the footmen before the fire until their legs shrank into menial proportions."

Laura clapped her hands with glee.

"Oh, papa," cried she, "can't we have wax servants to wait upon us?"

"I will mention the subject to Mrs. Merton," said he, gravely.

"Would you like to have a wax governess, Laura?" I asked.

"No," she answered quickly. "I don't want you to go away. I love you."

"She shan't go away," said Mr. Merton.

"I have no wish to go," I exclaimed impulsively; "I am very happy here."

"I will keep your secret," returned Mr. Merton with a laugh. "Happiness is a treasure you are not likely to preserve long unless you hide it. There are people who, if they have a suspicion that you are happy, will set to work and dig up your heart, and not rest until they have unearthed and carried away the golden content. Lorry and I will respect your confidence; but don't tell anybody else that you are happy. Rather look melancholy. Imitate the miser who hides a

pocket-book stuffed with notes under rags. Nothing in this life is more aggressive than happiness. There are people who will never forgive you for having a contented heart."

Though he talked in general terms, the implied reference to his wife, and only to his wife, was as marked as though he had spoken directly of her.

"Do you advise me to assume a woe-begone look, sir?"

"No, you must not look too woe-begone, for that is as aggressive as a happy air. Let your features be diffused with a pleasing melancholy. Let your smile be slow and pensive. That sort of manner provokes no anger, and it is too mild to excite pity. Thus decorated, you will go through life accredited with just trouble enough to prevent people from envying you. After all, one's great anxiety in this life must be—to be let alone. One wants a manner which will achieve this, though it shall not be so defined as to earn one the title of misanthrope or cynic."

"But I am not so sure that everybody is so well satisfied to be let alone. People like to feel that they are sympathised with."

"At eighteen people may like to feel this; but as we get older we make discoveries, and

among the first is the discovery that sympathy is a sham."

"I hope it will take me a long time to make that discovery."

"I hope so. I found it out at a very early age—as a schoolboy; I was friends at school with a youngster who told me so often that he was ready at any moment to perish in my behalf that I believed him. Being perfectly honest myself, I would not go quite so far as to declare that I would shed my blood for him; but I told him I would do great things—very great things; and my enthusiasm of friendship ran so high as the willingness to lose a leg or an arm rather than see him injured. In fancy we made wonderful excursions together, and covered ourselves with glory. Now we were pirates, now hunters, now soldiers; and over and over again in imagination have I lost my leg whilst making a dash for his rescue from the jaws of a tiger or a circle of Frenchmen, while he has perished riddled with shot or red with wounds in the endeavour to liberate me from similar predicaments. Never were two such friends. I was blessed with a good mother; he was an orphan under the charge of a parsimonious guardian. My hampers were frequent, as you

may believe, and my loose cash tolerably unbounded. He, on the other hand, got nothing from home, save once a year a small, hard, black plum-pudding, which he shared with me. Here you have before you, Miss Malcolmson, a very agreeable picture of boyish friendship, about which the poets have sung and authors prosed for ever so many years, and celebrated as superior to every other kind of friendship, being more unaffected and more profoundly, if artlessly sympathetic."

"Yes, sir."

"Mark the sequel. I was one day reading behind the trunk of a large tree that stood in the playground, when my bosom-friend, not suspecting that I was within ear-shot, approached with another boy. I heard my name mentioned, and listened. What did I hear spoken by the voice of my bosom friend? That I was a very soft-headed little fool, whom he would never have honoured with his friendship but for the quantity of pots of marmalade and the seed and plum cakes, and the bottles of raisin and elderberry wine that were sent me from home. That was the gist of his declamation. What had brought it about I knew not; but young as I was, it gave me a great shock, and rendered me so sensi-

tive that I degenerated from one of the merriest into the most unhappy boy in that school."

"He must have been a very wicked boy," said Laura, who sat listening with devout attention to every word her father uttered.

"It is a true experience, Miss Malcolmson," he continued, with a smile at his child. "But we can make a parable of it if we like by calling my false little friend the World. The moral is very old and trite. It has been done into a hundred proverbs. Shakespeare has wrought it into, to my mind, the greatest of his dramas; and it has filled the world with a large proportion of cynics. What man can help being cynical who, following the current of his bosom-friend's sympathies, traces its source to his jam and elderberry wine? The cellar and the table! Are not those your real and genuine founts of sympathy? Why do I unconsciously find my hand buttoning my coat over my heart when I pass a poor man? And why do I thrill with generous emotions, why do I unbutton my pocket and bare my heart, and puff and blubber, and become sensible of the one touch of nature that makes the whole world kin, when I shake a rich man by the hand? Alas!

Miss Malcolmson, human sympathy, genuine sympathy, like precious metals, lies, in an intellectual sense, underground. You must dig deep in society, and not stop until you come to a very low-lying stratum,—to courts and alleys and dens,—if you want to find it."

"But to revert to your school experience, surely, sir, you do not quote that boy you spoke of as a type of friends?"

"I do. We have no friends. Man is born into this world alone; he goes through life alone; he dies alone. If we could but look into each other's hearts, my God! how lonesome should we feel! We should be like spectres, passing each other without greeting, silent, self-absorbed, traversing a desert. We have no friends!" he repeated vehemently. "We flatter ourselves that we are liked, that we are esteemed, that we have the sympathy of those who sit at our table, and pull their hats off to us in the street. It is a lie—but a necessary lie. No man *dare* think himself friendless: the implications of such a belief are too overwhelming. He who will not deceive himself, who knows that he is alone in this world, is called misanthrope, cynic, tub-philosopher. But is he not right? What do filled drawing-rooms signify? friendship? If

that be friendship, then the butcher has a friend in every dog in his neighbourhood. See how they fill his doorway! How respectfully they wag their tails, now eyeing the host in the blue apron, now the legs of mutton and beef upon the hooks! Those dogs would as lief eat the butcher were he cut into pieces as his meat. . Such is their friendship. I have known friends eat a man out of house and home, and pass him in the street as if he were no better than the broken victuals they left on their plates at his table. Depend upon it, my schoolboy friend is a true type of the world. Give me enough jam and elderberry wine and I will have as many friends as will take you a day to count. But as the jam sinks in the pot, as the wine ebbs in the bottle, so will their friendship decay. It is a harsh philosophy—*not* musical, as is Apollo's lute. There are nobler creeds: but let their votaries beware, for the gods they worship, though beautiful, are false."

At that moment Mrs. Merton came into the room. He rose from his seat without a word, and walked out. She took no more notice of the action than had he been a footman.

Very shortly after we withdrew.

CHAPTER XI.

IN WHICH I PUT SOME PERTINENT QUESTIONS TO JANE WAKEFIELD.

I THINK everyone must be sorry who sees a man obviously kind-hearted, generous in his impulses, possessed of good instincts and wholesome emotions, cynical in the profession of his social creed. His misanthropy presupposes a very great wrong done him. You are sure that the thunder-clap must have been a disastrous and terrible one that turned the rich vintage of his qualities sour.

Some people are cynical because they think cynicism a pretty and becoming wear. Others are contrabandists in sentiment, not because they enjoy the expression of smuggled emotion, but because they have an aversion from paying any sort of duty to custom. Others are misanthropical for conscience' sake; they wish the errors of others to plead the justi-

fication of their own wrong-doing. Cynicism of this kind is very pitiful. It is seldom sustained. Its professors deviate incessantly into sympathy, and prove their kinship with humanity by affecting its weaknesses and virtues. It does not appeal to us. We know it is spurious. We recognise it as a convenience. We smile at the misanthrope who, when he quits the stage, goes home to the affections against which he has been uttering pages of fluent diatribe.

But cynicism in a man like Mr. Merton is a serious affair. We may convince ourselves that it is a plant which could never flourish in the natural soil of his heart, but must owe its existence to a process of tyranny or disappointment which forced it out of his intellect. That Mr. Merton's nature was a good, and even a noble nature, I had no doubt. He was a gentleman in that large sense of the word, which, though it does not exclude, does not insist on a niceness of phrase and sentiment as a condition; but which comprises the more admirable qualities of benevolence, affability, courtesy, good-temper, and magnanimity. No ordinary ungentle hand could have turned the current of such qualities awry; and therefore it was that his cynicism served

only to prejudice me more decidedly against Mrs. Merton, without in any wise affecting my opinion of him.

Him, indeed, I had liked from the beginning, and liked better as I knew him better.

I admired his face. Rugged and unhandsome as it would have been thought by those whose tastes could fancy only the heroical in countenances—who could find no merit outside the straight-nosed, level-browed, clearly-cut visages—I found it as I got to know it well, almost fascinating. Could I draw his likeness, however capitally, I have little doubt you would think him plain enough. That would be because no pencil, no brush, however magically wielded, could delineate those shifting expressions which Lord Bacon truly calls "the better part of beauty."

And shall I confess that, much as I admire good looks in either sex, from my earliest days my mind has been warped by a vexatious prejudice against those model individuals who pass through life under the suspicious title of "handsome men?" I have met several of them in my day: yet I don't remember a single point in my broad, short, rough-hewn, plain-faced master or friend,

Samuel Merton, which I would have exchanged for all their hyacinthine curls and elegant noses, their bloomy cheeks, and ebon or amber moustaches.

The truth is, beauty is so essentially a feminine attribute that in proportion as a man has it so his character seems to me to lose muscularity. I cannot conceive a great hero a handsome man in the false sense in which we apply that adjective. Lord Peterborough, I believe, was "good-looking:" but were Cæsar, Alexander, Wellington, Ney, Frederick the Great, Napoleon, Richard I., Marlborough, or the majority of the eminent warriors instanced by Lord Byron at the beginning of "Don Juan?" That young guardsman yonder, with his hair so exactly parted, you would think he used his comb with a ruler; with his well-soaped moustache, white hands and languid eyes, is probably handsomer than any hero we read of in history. Yet with what relief does the disappointed eye turn from his pink and white to the rugged bronze, the broad brow and chest, the keen eyes and large heavy-veined hands of that short man there, who, were he to ask you, Sophia, to dance, you would probably answer that your card was full, though I dare-

say you could find a corner, like Goldsmith's Jew for the pasty, for the name of the lovely young subaltern. The better part of beauty is totally independent of hair, eyes, nose, mouth, figure. The best men live behind their faces, and are well satisfied to let those who love them find their physical trappings and adornment; for the beauty we make and give lasts longer than the beauty we find. Love grows superior to taste, as you may discover for yourself by asking your neighbour, a fond wife, her notions of manly beauty; and hearing that little eyes and red hair, a large mouth and perhaps a wart on the forehead make a real and only type of charms. The beauty, Lord bless you, is not in your neighbour's husband, but in your neighbour's eyes: the only soil in which the flower of beauty never fades.

To come back to Mr. Merton, I paid no compliment to his face by admiring it, but to his character. I liked him so well that I could not but think those features the most handsome which best expressed the nature I respected and relished.

I remember telling Laura when we had returned to the Red Room after the conversation just recorded, that she ought to be proud

to have such a kind-hearted handsome man for a father as Mr. Merton.

I spoke my honest conviction, which had been strengthened instead of moderated by the cynical sentiments he had expressed. The very misanthropy of his views persuaded me of the existence of a fund of deep and generous sympathies. His face had been lighted up, whilst he conversed with a mingled expression of mirth and malice that had suited him wonderfully.

Laura idolised her father, and my praise earned me a grateful kiss, and an assurance that "papa was the dearest, sweetest, beautifullest papa in the world;" which it was quite right she should think him, for I never saw any love more charming and touching than the love Mr. Merton bore his little girl.

You may guess my embarrassment, however, next afternoon, when Mr. Merton came into the room where I was helping Laura with her lessons, and without a word of preface said—

"I have taken the first opportunity I could find to come and thank you for the very handsome compliment you paid me last night. Laura repeated your praise this morning. I wish Mrs. Merton had been present; she

ought to know that you think me good-hearted."

I blushed rather deeply, much surprised by his intrusion and remarks. He looked at me fixedly, but with a very pleasant smile, as if he had no idea that his gaze increased my confusion.

"To be called good-hearted at my time of life, Miss Malcolmson," he continued, "is one of the finest compliments a man can receive. For surely the man must be an excellent fellow, an honest, true fellow, who can deserve the praise of good-heartedness at forty. Do I deserve it with my misanthropic soul? I fear not. What made you give me that praise?"

"I don't know, sir. I spoke what I thought," I answered with more spirit than I was afraid I should be able to muster.

"Good-hearted means a great deal. It is delightful praise. A man may possess many good qualities and yet not possess a good heart."

"I should never have made the remark, had I dreamt it would have met your ears," I said looking rather reproachfully at Laura.

"Why not, Miss Malcolmson? If you are sincere in your thoughts why should you not speak them? Praise is a more useful com-

esteem it. There is too much selfishness for me to relish. I will believe in motherly love when I hear no more of girls being driven into marriages against their will; when I see mothers sacrificing dress and luxuries for their children's sakes; when I see mothers nursing their babies instead of giving them into strangers' hands, having them with them of nights instead of consigning them to the sleepy care of servants. This is very unsentimental talk, Miss Malcolmson; but I must give you my reasons for my infidelity. I believe deeply in Nature. *She* never betrays. I believe in the love of birds for their young, of goats for their kids, of lionesses for their whelps. But human nature is another thing. Take my word for it, mothers' love is more sentimental than true. It is a pretty subject for the poet; but the man who deals in facts must drop trope and metaphor and speak of things as they are.....After hearing me talk like this, will you continue to think me good-hearted?"

"I believe, sir, that you do not talk from your convictions, but merely for the sake of certain theories which the world—and not the world, but a few people in it—have succeeded in establishing in your mind."

"You give me credit for being easily influenced," he exclaimed with a laugh. Be it so. But pray preserve your good opinion of my heart—you may think what you like of my mind."

And so saying he walked over to Laura, patted her on the head and, with a rather curious smile at me, left the room.

I had half a mind to tell Laura that she should be careful not to repeat what I said to her of her father and mother. But I reflected that should this injunction ever reach their ears it might be misinterpreted; for it would be naturally inquired what ought I to say to her that she should not repeat? Instead therefore of desiring her silence, I made up my mind to be more cautious how I expressed myself before her, as I could now guess that every word I uttered was likely to be told to Mr. Merton.

Shortly after Laura had gone down stairs to receive her music-lesson, the young girl, Jane Wakefield, knocked at my door.

She had come to return me the book she had borrowed. I asked her if she would take another volume. She replied no.

"I have no time for reading. And even when I have a little leisure I am too dull to read."

"Sit down, Jane," I said. "I saw you had been crying last night when I accompanied Mrs. Merton to her bedroom. I have been waiting for a chance to speak to you about it."

She closed the door and came forward with a cowed air that was painfully suggestive of the cruel discipline to which she was daily subjected. She seated herself and fixed her eyes upon me.

"Before I ask you to stop and have a little chat," I remarked, "I should like to know if Mrs. Merton is out. I don't want to get you into a scrape."

"If she were not out, miss, I shouldn't dare have come so far away from her bedroom."

"You talk of daring. How comes it that you fear your mistress so greatly? I cannot understand your alarm. I noticed your manner last night, and I must say that I was quite grieved to see you hold this woman in such terror."

"I can't help it," she exclaimed; "I am afraid of her. She frightens me. Sometimes I fear that she will kill me."

"If that is the case I should think any state of life preferable to the misery you now undergo. Why don't you give notice?"

"I'd give notice to-morrow," she replied

eagerly, "if I thought I could get another situation."

"But what makes you doubt that you will get another situation?"

"Mistress has refused to give me a character over and over again; and if I were to give notice, I know she would fly into such a passion that she would be certain to refuse me a character, or write so badly of me to the lady or gentleman who might make inquiries, that I should never get a place."

"But wouldn't the lady who recommended you to Mrs. Merton speak in your behalf?"

"She is dead, miss."

"But consider, this sort of life will kill you if you continue in it much longer. Your face is quite bloodless, and you look as thin as if you had been fasting for a month. Really, to hear you talk, one might suppose that slavery flourished in this country. You seem as bound to Mrs. Merton as if she had bought you body and soul, like the negroes are bought in America."

"What would you advise me to do, miss?" she asked plaintively.

"I know what *I* would do. But you haven't courage enough for my counsel to be of any benefit," I said hardily.

It is astonishing how practicable your advice always seems when it is intended for somebody else to carry out.

"I wish you would counsel me," she cried; "I am very wretched."

And she burst into tears. I was much concerned to see her weep. There was something so miserably woe-begone in her pale face, something so piteous and helpless in the expression of her eyes, that I could not regard her without sincere distress.

"Don't cry," I said soothingly. "Tears cannot improve your condition. Indeed they will make you more unfit to cope with the difficulties of your position. I was going to tell you that if I were in your place, I should not stop in this house another day. I would rather walk the streets and beg for bread than serve so tyrannical a woman. Still I should be sorry to see you act on my advice, unless you felt sure that you had courage enough to wait for or seek another place. Unfortunately I have not a friend in the world to whom I could make application for you."

"I should have no difficulty in getting another situation," she replied, "if mistress would only give me a character. But I haven't the courage to throw up a place, how-

ever bad it is, before being sure of another. It is a dreadful thing to starve or go to the workhouse."

"So it is; but that is a contingency which there is no great use in considering; for a neat-handed, active girl like you ought not to starve nor end in the workhouse. Have you ever tried after another situation?"

"No, miss."

"Why do you not answer some of the advertisements for servants which are constantly appearing in the papers, and in a straightforward letter, which I should be glad to help you to write, explain the severity of Mrs. Merton's treatment and her refusal to give you a character? A well-written letter might induce the person you wrote to, to give you a trial; and if once you get into a house it will be your own fault if you leave it."

"But suppose the lady I wrote to should send to Mrs. Merton to tell her what I had said? Mrs. Merton would be certain to send me away then, and I should leave without a character and without a place to go to."

I saw with pity, which her youth and fragile appearance prevented me from mixing with contempt, the excessive limpness of her nature. Plainly her whole training had been opposed

to an independent view of things. I could conceive her to have been a very delicate child in whom the sense of helplessness, that had been inspired by bad health, had never been extinguished. Mrs. Merton's threat to refuse her a character was an idea in the girl's mind intimately associated with the workhouse or starvation. Likely enough her hard mistress had often told her in her fits of passion that starvation or something akin to it would be the penalty she would have to pay for leaving her; and the young creature believed it. To advise her to leave the house without providing her with another situation would be unkind; for she seemed as little capable of procuring a situation by her own unaided efforts as she was of battling with her mistress's tyranny.

"Why is Mrs. Merton so severe with you?" I asked. "She does not treat the other servants so badly."

"Because they are not with her like I am; and then she knows I am frightened of her, and that makes her more reckless in what she says and does to me."

"You suit her very well, do you not?"

"I suit her as well as anybody could. I always do my best to please her. I make

myself ill with anxiety to do things that shall make her speak kindly to me. But she has a fearful temper. Look here what she did to me yesterday afternoon."

She unbuttoned the wristband of her sleeve and bared her arm. A little below the elbow I saw a broad livid mark.

"What is that?" I asked.

"That is where she pinched me," she answered.

"Pinched you!" I cried indignantly. "What with? A pair of tweezers? Why, the mark looks like a heavy blow."

"She gripped me with her fingers," she said, pulling down her sleeve. "She came in from her walk yesterday afternoon in a bad temper. She told me to take her comb out of her head and plait her back hair. I saw that she was in a violent temper and that made me nervous. In taking down her hair I supposed I pulled it too hard; for she turned sharply round and pinched me as you see, crying, 'I can hurt you too! I can hurt you too!' I screamed with the pain; for her fingers made my flesh feel as if it were burnt. 'I hope,' she says, 'that will teach you not to be so clumsy for the future.'"

"Had she served me that trick," I exclaimed

indignantly, "I should have pulled her back hair out of her head. How *can* you stand her treatment? She ought to have a keeper—a person accustomed to lunatics to wait upon her; not a lady's maid. Have you told Mr. Merton of this?"

"No, miss."

"Why don't you?"

"What could he do? He would only advise me to leave. Mistress wouldn't mind what he says. On the contrary, it would be enough for him to take my part to make her treat me more cruelly."

"But he might give you a character or find you another place. I will speak to him myself. He is a just and kind man and would not allow any human creature in his house to suffer such treatment, if he knew it, as you do."

"I am sure it is very kind of you to take so much interest in me," she said timidly, rising as she spoke with a nervous glance at the clock. "If you speak to Mr. Merton I should like you to ask him not to mention my name to mistress. Whatever he may say to her will do no good; and it may anger her so that she might order me out of the house at once."

"That is just what I could desire her to do were I in your place. However, since you seem to dread the idea of being dismissed without securing another situation first,—and it is only Mrs, Merton's great cruelty that makes your dread unreasonable—I will do as you wish and ask Mr. Merton's assistance to find you another place without mentioning the matter to his wife."

"I am deeply grateful to you, miss," she replied with a curtsey.

"It is impossible to suppose that you can continue residing here. I noticed last night when I was in Mrs. Merton's bedroom that your eyes were red. I suppose you had been crying because of the malicious pinch she gave you?"

"Yes, miss, and because I felt so lonely. I wouldn't stay if I had any friends to go to."

"How do you get on with the other servants?"

"Pretty well. They are civil and obliging enough, because they know what I go through and are sorry for me."

"Your manners and conversation are so superior to theirs that I should have imagined you and they would not have got on. It seems to me that you would make a good

nursery governess. You are no doubt fairly well educated, and they tell me you are a skilful needle-woman, which is a good recommendation to people who have children. I will ask Mr. Merton if he will not help you into something better than the miserable life you are leading here. I am sure he will if he can."

After repeating her thanks warmly and gratefully, she went away leaving me deeply sympathising with her and very desirous to see her removed from the neighbourhood of the bad woman who, I had been shown, had the trick of using her hands as vengefully as she used her tongue.

CHAPTER XII.

HOW MR. MERTON RECEIVED MY APPEAL.

I COULD not speak to Mr. Merton about Wakefield that night, for there was to be a dinner-party at eight, and we did not go to the drawing-room.

From Mr. Merton's "views" it was easy to guess that the dinner-parties and balls they gave and went to were not his taste. What I had seen of him made me suspect that had he been a widower he would have gone very little into society. His pleasure appeared to consist in strolling about his grounds with Laura; he was fond of out-door exercise, of fishing, hunting, shooting. Had he married a different sort of woman from Mrs. Merton, or had he remained a bachelor, he would probably have settled in his middle age into one of those picturesque squires one reads of.

men of rough, shrewd tongues, haters of cant, unconventional as children, fond of their bottle and their dogs, at war with the rector, and intense admirers of Castlereagh.

Mrs. Merton's love of society, however, had obliged him to keep it very largely. Laura told me that in winter her mother was incessantly giving balls. When I heard this I ceased to marvel that so bad-tempered a woman should have so many people calling on her, for without wishing to echo Mr. Merton's cynical views of life, I am bound to say that society will forgive a world of defects in those who love it and fête it.

It happened, however, next morning, that Mr. Merton came to the Red Room to see Laura, to whom he could not leave the dinner-table the night before to give his customary kiss.

I hardly knew whether to begin the subject of Wakefield before Laura, because I felt that the conversation would lead him into saying some hard things against his wife. But I was truly anxious about the poor girl; for long after I had gone to bed her pale face and piteous eyes had haunted me, and I could not but doubt whether anything severer was likely to be said of Mrs. Mer-

ton than had already been expressed before Laura.

So when after kissing his child, he came forward to give me his hand, I said,

"I beg your pardon, sir, for troubling you, but if you can spare me the time I wish you would let me have five minutes' talk with you."

He answered in his usual affable manner, "Certainly," slightly raising his brows, and looking at me with questioning eyes. I fancy that he was surprised. He sat down near Laura, and observing me to be a little embarrassed—for now that I had challenged his attention I hardly knew how to begin the subject—he said, with a smile,

"Are you going to tell me that Laura is a very naughty child; that she won't learn her lessons; and that you want me to lock her up in one of the dark rooms downstairs?"

"No, sir; Laura is a very good, dear child. It is not about Laura that I want to speak to you, but about one of the servants here, Jane Wakefield."

"What of her, Miss Malcolmson?"

"I have met her several times, and conversed with her, and have been struck, as I am sure you have been, by her very superior manner."

"Nay, don't tell me I have been struck. I know little or nothing of the girl except that she is fearfully shy, and as timid as a mouse if you do but open your mouth in her presence. She is my wife's maid; and that is all I know of her."

"But, sir, have you not noticed that she looks very ill? Pray excuse me. I cannot help taking an interest in her. She is, like myself, an orphan, and quite friendless. She tells me—I should not say she tells me, for that would convey the idea that she comes to me with her grievances—but in reply to my questions as to what occasions her pale face and singularly cowed air (for she is cowed, not shy, as you think, sir) she informs me that the treatment she receives from Mrs. Merton is—I must use the word—inhuman."

He looked at me with an air of great interest.

"Pray continue," he said, seeing me pause.

"I asked her if she ever complained to you. She replied that she did not. She told me it would do no good to complain. She said that were you to reproach Mrs. Merton for her treatment of her, it would only aggravate her mistress's behaviour, and perhaps procure

her dismissal, which she dreads to a degree that seems incredible."

"Dreads! Why, I should have thought if Mrs. Merton makes her suffer so much, that the girl would be delighted to leave."

"She would be delighted to leave could she be sure of receiving a good character from Mrs. Merton. But over and over again she has been threatened to be packed off without a character; and being friendless, she fears that she would not be able to procure another situation."

"Oh, I see. Mrs. Merton refuses, in case of her going, to speak for her?"

"Yes, sir."

"But servants are sometimes taken without characters."

"So I told her. But she seems to live in terror of the workhouse or starvation. I do not sympathise with her fears, but I sympathise with the sufferings she has to undergo here."

"Pooh!" he said contemptuously, "she must be a fool. Workhouse! starvation! What does she mean? She has legs to carry her to another house, and arms to work there, hasn't she?"

"She has legs to carry her to another house,

no doubt, sir; but I am not so sure that the door of that house would be opened to her if she could not produce a testimonial of her character, or give some references."

"She always struck me as a foolish-looking girl, neat indeed, and not unhandsome, but soft and spiritless—just such a piece of mortality," he exclaimed in a sort of "aside," "that my wife's temper would love to bury its talons in. I am sorry for her; but that is not saying much, for I am sorry for everybody who has anything to do with Mrs. Merton."

"She showed me," I said in a low voice, glancing at Laura, who had left her chair and was turning over the leaves of a book at a side-table, "she showed me her arm, with a livid mark upon it, caused by Mrs. Merton's fingers."

"That's very bad," he answered, coldly and hardly. "Mrs. Merton has a famous trick of using her hands. She concludes, probably, with the ancient orator, that eloquence is action. Do you see that mark?"

He extended his large and sinewy hand, and pointed to a scar in the flesh between the first and second fingers.

"Yes, sir."

"That is where I had the good fortune,

one fine morning about five years ago, to catch the knife that Mrs. Merton threw at me, intending it for my head. Tell Jane Wakefield that, and bid her congratulate herself on the fact of Mrs. Merton having limited her weapons of attack upon her, so far, to her fingers."

There was something grim almost to ferocity in the way he said this. His levity was as shocking as the white smile on the face of an angered man. It silenced me. For the first time since I had known him, he inspired me with a feeling of downright fear.

Laura came to me, and I passed my arm around her neck with a sense almost of relief. He glanced from her to me with a furtive but keen gleam of intelligence in his eyes as if he read my thoughts. He then smiled, and pointing to his child, exclaimed :

"Your attitude puts me in mind of a picture I once saw at Vienna. A mother sits with her arm round her child's neck, in the presence of a menacing father. The devil is in his eyes and in his clenched fist, for he threatens her so!" He raised his arm and looked at me with such a scowling face, that Laura uttered a cry. "But the painter makes us see by the mother's pained indifference and

by the child's brave gaze that the devil can harm no creature who has innocence for a shield. Come, Laura, stand near me. The Fiend is always abroad seeking for whom he may devour. He may be wanting to make a meal of me at this moment for aught I can tell. So come, quick!"

He stretched out his arm and drew Laura to him.

"Now I am safe," he said, looking at me and circling his child with his arm.

There was a silence whilst he bent his eyes on Laura's face, and watched her. Presently glancing round;

"We have not done with our friend, Jane Wakefield, yet, Miss Malcolmson," he said. "She is miserable, eh? Badly treated and anxious to leave, but without sufficient hardihood to walk out of the house. Really she ought to be very much obliged to you for taking this interest in her. And what do you want me to do?"

"I was in hope of exciting your compassion for her: but I see that her case does not move you much."

"Do you want me to shed tears? Alack! the sweet emotional source is dry. Laura has drained it. She has all the tears that

were once mine. But if you allow that pocket handkerchiefs may be used by proxy, Laura shall weep for me."

He was certainly in a very odd mood; disagreeable because it was so utterly unintelligible. It had been my custom, however, always to fall as I best could into his current humour. I had discovered that he liked me better for doing so. The very audacity of some of the remarks I made to him, saved me from the charge of impertinence. Probably a less bold tongue than mine would have been resented. But the true secret, perhaps, of my success in pleasing, or rather in not displeasing him, lay in the element, marked and abiding, of respect, which I was always careful to infuse into my remarks, and exhibit in my manners.

"If I thought that tears would profit Wakefield," I answered, "I should not take the liberty of calling upon you for them, as I dare say I hide within me as abundant a supply as even Laura has?"

"What then am I to do?"

"I fancied, sir—knowing, as you doubtless must, that the girl's sorrows and sufferings cannot be light—that I might influence your compassion into procuring her another situation."

"What is the reason of your espousing her cause so warmly? Does she, under her woe-begone and startled manner, hide a large capacity of eloquence which she has brought to bear upon you?"

"Her simple statements are eloquent enough. Her face is more eloquent still. To tell you the plain truth, sir, I think she will die if she remains much longer at Ashleigh Manor."

"Do you think Mrs. Merton will kill her?"

"She is treated with so much severity, that I believe it will break her heart."

"That sounds strangely; yet I admit the possibility. Let me see: if she dies, what verdict will result from the inquest? Murder or manslaughter?"

"Ought we to push our inquiries so far? The subject is painful, and the possibility of the young creature's death makes it shocking."

"Ah, you are tender-hearted, Miss Malcolmson. It is a mistake to be tender-hearted. But since you don't like to speculate on Wakefield's death, suppose we speculate on mine. Imagine me dying of Mrs. Merton's treatment. An inquest is held. What will be the verdict?"

I wouldn't answer him.

"If murder, then of course Mrs. Merton would be hanged. If manslaughter, she would be let free, and doubtless marry again. Well, if I had to choose, I had rather be hanged than married. I laugh when I hear a Cockney calling altar halter, and halter altar; the sounds are absurdly akin, and so are the experiences."

His mood was strangely mercurial. His attention was not to be fixed.

"About Jane Wakefield, now," he said, with a laugh, as if his dodging ideas diverted him. "You want me to get her another place, lest she should die. I will bear that in mind. I will talk to her. If she should die, Mrs. Merton might be held responsible. I would be happy to give evidence—against her. But it would be a criminal case, and a husband's testimony would not be admitted. You, however, could give evidence, Miss Malcolmson. You could say that it was Mrs. Merton who did the murder. Let the crime be proved, and justice would divorce me from my wife. For such a consummation ought I not to encourage Mrs. Merton in her treatment of Wakefield, and decline to take any steps which would lead to the girl's leaving us? Suppose Wakefield, in a fit of ungovernable rage, should

turn upon her mistress and murder her? That would be a more decent way of doing the thing—of obtaining the divorce, look you. Mr. Merton's wife murdered, Mr. Merton is pitied. Mr. Merton's wife hanged, Mr. Merton is cut. But Mrs. Merton's lady's maid hanged—she being an orphan, you see, and friendless—nobody is injured, and the family honour of the Mertons remains unstained. Are you fond of speculating, Miss Malcolmson? I should say not. One needs much courage and audacity to follow one's imagination. For what a sprite this imagination is! What dances it leads one, now over swamps and hedges, now over flower gardens and green meadows, sometimes breaking one's neck at last by way of a finale to the gay gallop. Heigho, Laura!" he exclaimed, rising, "I wish, pet, that you and I had wings, that we might take each other's hand and fly off to one of the stars, where from the calm and brilliance we might gaze upon this sad world, and thank God we are well out of it."

He looked at the clock.

"Time for lessons, is it not, Miss Malcolmson? I become an intruder. Au revoir. I will remember Jane Wakefield."

And he walked out of the room.

CHAPTER XIII.

IN WHICH ARE RELATED THE PARTICULARS OF A QUARREL.

AT my age and at this distance of time, I do not pretend that my memory is so accurate as to enable me to set down the precise words Mr. Merton uttered when he talked to me. But I know by my own feelings on reading those which I have put into his mouth that you may accept them as a faithful picture of his conversation. Nor yet a faithful picture; I should rather speak of them as a faithful outline. The colouring; the half-tones fuller fraught with significance than the words they vehicled; the inflections giving sarcasm, or emphasis, or pathos; how are these—the deeper part of language, as expression is the truer part of beauty—to be described? And yet, unless your imagination can make these

tones, these inflections audible, his conversation will be found but a most lame and insufficient vehicle of his ideas.

No man's language was ever more filled with double-meanings than Mr. Merton's. He talked not so much to conceal as to imply without expressing his true meaning. His ideas played hide-and-seek with his listener behind his words. It seemed to perplex and even irritate the ear. He made you attentive in spite of yourself, not because what he said was striking or in any degree superior to the conversation of ordinary people, but because you felt its ambiguity. He piqued and teased your curiosity. He talked plain thoughts—simple and trite ideas—in such a way as to make them conundrums. When he conversed you found yourself perpetually searching the apparently transparent medium of his words for the man.

Perversity is often the key that fits men who seem riddles. It is a simple solution, and I have seldom found it fail in its application to people who are looked upon as enigmas.

I applied this key to Mr. Merton. I was quite sure that nothing but perversity could make him talk with such grim heedlessness

before his daughter, whose innocence and youth seemed his one joy.

But he was not perverse. There was not sufficient consistency in what I chose to consider his unwisdom to make his mistake intelligible. Often he would talk to her with a nobility of sentiment that charmed and fascinated me. His views would grow idealistic. He converted the world into an Utopia, in which a Diogenes would have been impossible.

But when he talked to me—and his language to me was, I had no doubt, the language he held to others—his remarks were acidulated with cynicism. He seemed to forget what he had been telling his daughter by completely subverting his sentiments. And all that he said bore reference in degrees near or distant to his wife. These references, even when most remote, were singularly significant of hate, so cool and malevolent that I would consider its expression as a further effort on his part to puzzle me. This opinion would be confirmed by the moderate language he held when he spoke directly of her. There was invariably a kind of levity in his remarks which sometimes made me think that he regarded his married life on the whole, as par-

taking more of the ludicrous than the serious. He spoke of her too contemptuously to suffer me to imagine that the grief she caused him and of which he often complained, gave him as much pain as he would hint it did.

Having kept the promise I had made to Wakefield, I awaited with some anxiety the result of my appeal to Mr. Merton.

A week, a fortnight passed, however, without his recurring to the subject. His indifference disappointed me. I had been sure that he would make haste to redress the poor girl's grievance, for hers had seemed to me precisely such a case as he would sympathise with. I was the more annoyed by his silence because I had buoyed the girl up with hope that he would very shortly provide her with another place; and I felt that my honour was in a great measure concerned in the fulfilment of the assurance I had given her.

Yet I did not like to be the first to begin the subject again to Mr. Merton. No condescension on his part could ever make me lose sight of the position I occupied in his house; and in proportion as he was polite and kind to me so did I shrink from trespassing upon his friendship. I had no doubt that he had not forgotten the request I had made

him ; and his silence therefore I was to interpret into a wish that he did not want to be troubled with the matter.

After all, it was no affair for the master of the house to meddle in. He could not sympathise with the girl's character as I did, and was therefore, I presumed, unable to comprehend why she did not give her mistress notice and leave her if she was so unhappy. What should a man, born like Mr. Merton with a splendid fortune, know of the conditions which hamper money-getting among the working-classes ? He put himself in Wakefield's place and saw how he would act if he were so circumstanced : he would leave. Of what would follow his departure he had, of course, the most indefinite ideas. The girl on the other hand was capable, like myself, of pursuing action to its issue. She could see herself unprovided with the testimonial which was to procure her admittance into another family, and was therefore sure that she would find great difficulty in procuring another situation. Meanwhile where should she go? How should she live ?

But with such a kitchen-sorrow as this how could I expect Mr. Merton to sympathise ?

When I found by his silence that it was

not his intention to do anything for the girl, my compassion being kept alive by the poor creature's forlorn air, and the stories of Mrs. Merton's conduct which she repeated to me from time to time when she visited me in the Red Room, I made up my mind to go to the fountain-head, and see if I could not get Mrs. Merton to make me a promise that, in the event of Wakefield leaving her, she would give her a character.

I hesitated a long time before I put my resolution into practice; for I had a misgiving that I might do Wakefield a greater injury by speaking to Mrs. Merton about her, than were I to keep silent. However, one evening when I was alone with her and Laura in the drawing-room, the recollection of a conversation I had had with Wakefield a day or two before stirred in me an impulse to open the subject; and without a word of preface, I said—

"Would you object, madam, to give Wakefield a character if she were to express a wish to leave you?"

She was seated in an arm-chair, caressing a lap-dog that lay snugly under her arm. That dog got more fondled in one day than Laura had been since her birth. She raised her

black eyes, and asked sharply what Wakefield had to do with me?

"Nothing," I answered, resolved not to be crushed on a sudden. I was going on with my reply when she took the words out of my mouth.

"Then why do you question me about her?"

"It struck me," I said, hypocritically, "that the girl looked in such delicate health as to doubt whether she would be able to serve you much longer. She seems to me to stand in need of a change——"

"Has she been complaining to you?"

"Oh no," I answered with alacrity. "She is a conscientious girl, and is afraid that her health will unfit her for her duties."

"I can put up with her until she is unfit," she said, coldly; "and then I can discharge her."

"You stony-hearted creature!" I mentally exclaimed. "I wish a retributive Providence would transform *you* into a servant, and provide you with such another mistress as you are!"

"If ever illness should seize her," I said, "and she should be unable to do her work, I am sure I may promise her that you would

not let her go away without giving her a character."

"What has the girl got to do with you, Miss Malcolmson?" she cried, angrily. "Have you not your own business to attend to? If your duties do not give you sufficient occupation, it is a sign that the work I employed you to do is not done, in which case I had better look out for some one more zealous and conscientious."

"I endeavour to do my duty," I rejoined quietly; "and in spite of what you say, shall continue to hope that I have given you no cause to be dissatisfied. At the same time, I sincerely trust that, however faithfully I may do my work, I shall never be so wholly absorbed by it as not to find leisure for compassionating sorrow or illness in others."

She threw her dog upon the ground, and clasping her hands tightly, said—

"If you dare to take the liberty of talking to me in that tone, I shall order you out of my house."

There was something so aggressive, so insulting, so galling in the way she said this, that I lost my self-control.

"If I am to be ordered out of your house, Mrs. Merton, for daring to take the liberty of

expressing my sympathy for a girl who undergoes suffering enough here to break a heart of stone, the sooner you give your order for my departure the better. If you want to kill her, it would be more humane to take a knife and stab her with it, than break her down by a process of tyranny which is doubly cruel in her case—for you know that she has no friends to appeal to, no mother nor father to assist her in her extremity and avenge her."

Her eyes were in a blaze; but she seemed as much confounded as she was enraged. The colour was in my cheek, and my heart beat furiously. If I was not in so great a passion as she was in, I was hot enough in all conscience. And though I knew the penalty I should have to pay for my words, though I was sensible of an inward feeling that to-morrow I should be cursing my fool-hardy temerity, yet the excitement of defying, opposing, charging her with her wickedness, was so exquisite, that if I had been told to withdraw that moment on condition that matters should rest as they were, I am certain I should have preferred to hold my ground.

For some moments she seemed at a loss what to say. Once or twice she opened her mouth, but her rage made her stammer so

furiously, that she could not articulate. At last, giving a great swallow, as if all her passion lay in her throat and was choking her, she cried—

"Has Mr. Merton set you to insult me?"

"I thought I should be involved," exclaimed a voice behind me.

I turned, and there was Mr. Merton standing at the conservatory window. Whether he had been in the grounds or in the conservatory, I know not. In the latter, most likely, for the expression in his face made me imagine that he had overheard the whole of our conversation.

He came forward, and stood near my chair.

"I thought I should be involved," he repeated; "but you must acquit me, my dear, of the pretty charge you have just made. This thunder is all Miss Malcolmson's own."

No sooner did Mr. Merton approach me, than Laura left her chair and ran to my side. Thus was I supported by Mr. Merton on my left and Laura on my right. It would have appeared to anyone looking at us through a window, and not hearing our words, that I was being protected by father and child against the fury of the wife.

"What is the matter?" asked Mr. Merton.

"You have heard," exclaimed his wife, drawing up her form in such a way as to put me in mind of a snake rearing its head. "You have been listening in the conservatory. Why do you ask what is the matter? Miss Malcolmson has been vilely impudent to me. I will not have her in the house. She is not fit society for my daughter. She is a low person."

"Heavy charges," said Mr. Merton, in a quiet but hard voice. "What has she been saying to deserve all this abuse?"

"Why do you ask?" she cried. "You have been listening!"

"Perhaps you will tell me the nature and motive of your 'vile impudence,'" he said, looking down at me.

I rose from my chair. I did not like to remain seated whilst he stood.

"I am quite unconscious of having been vilely impudent, sir. I told Mrs. Merton that she was treating Wakefield with unjust severity."

"Impudent creature!" she cried. "How dare you pass an opinion on my conduct?"

"Nay, don't call names—don't lose your temper," he said, in a half-soothing, half-

satirical tone of voice. "Let us reason the matter calmly."

I noticed that she pressed her hands convulsively together as she answered—

"You are right not to take my side. I would not have you with me."

"I cannot be for or against you," he said, seating himself with as great an air of calmness as if he were engaged in a most agreeable conversation. "I am the head of this house, and must therefore play the part of magistrate. Let me hear your evidence; I will then hear Miss Malcolmson's defence, and judge whether her behaviour has been criminal enough to merit your heavy charges, and to forfeit the gratitude which, I must confess, we ought both of us to feel, for her love and care of Laura. You shall be usher," he added, turning to his child. "If there be any interruption or noise in court, call out 'Silence!'"

What Mrs. Merton would have said or done to her husband had she been alone with him, I know not; she looked at and listened to him with an expression in her face which, for want of a word to convey the full effect of its wicked malignity, I must call devilish. But our presence made her rage impotent.

She sat upright, her eyes sparkling, her face white, but did not speak.

"Now," he said, quite coolly, and with a great show of affability, "please let us hear what crime this young lady has committed?"

He paused, with a mock air of attention, as though waiting for her charge.

She sprang suddenly to her feet.

"Leave this room!" she cried to me, waving her hand.

Mr. Merton rose too. We were all standing now.

"No, no," he said: "this is not justice. She must remain to hear your charge, that she may know what defence to make."

"Do you hear me?" she called out, stamping her foot. "Leave the room."

I half turned, meaning to walk to the door.

"Stop!" cried Mr. Merton. "I desire you not to stir, Miss Malcolmson. Be seated. If the room must be cleared, let Mrs. Merton set us the example."

She walked to the piano, and leaned against it, breathing quickly.

"Be seated," he said to me. "Laura, come to me. You need not cling to Miss Malcolmson; she shall not leave you."

"She shall," I heard Mrs. Merton say, but

in so strange a voice that it sounded like a whisper.

"Go back to your arm-chair," said Mr. Merton to her: "subdue your rage, and tell us in reasonable terms—tell Laura and me calmly, and in honest, moderate English—why Miss Malcolmson must leave the house."

These were not words to soothe her. I wondered to see her remain in the room, and was amazed that the humiliation her husband's manner was heaping on her did not make her rush from our presence.

"If you will not speak," pursued Mr. Merton coldly, "I must. To your accusation of having listened to your conversation with Miss Malcolmson, let me plead guilty. Unlike most of your charges, this is a true one. What I heard informs me that it is your temper, and not Miss Malcolmson's language, that is to blame for this piquant and diverting situation. It is like a play, is it not, Laura? Oh, I forgot: you were never at a theatre. Some of these days I will take you to one when the piece I have in my mind is being performed. It is called 'Passion.' It does many vile things, this Passion—murder among the rest. It will not make you laugh; but it is sure to be followed by

a farce, and then we will take our fill of merriment. Will you not resume your seat, Mrs. Merton?"

She made him no answer, but continued to hold her place at the piano. There was something singularly wild in the expression of her eyes as she darted her keen and fiery glances from one to the other of us.

"I desire to express my deep regret," I exclaimed unfalteringly, "if I have said anything to give offence to Mrs. Merton. I am sorry for Jane Wakefield, and I took the liberty to say so. Though I shall certainly obey Mrs. Merton's orders to leave Ashleigh Manor, I shall ever consider that I have said nothing to justify in any way my abrupt dismissal. Mrs. Merton addressed me with a rudeness and vehemence in the first instance which was quite unwarranted by the politeness and respectfulness of my accost. I am a governess, but I am also a lady; and no sense of dependence shall oblige me to endure any other kind of treatment than I do my utmost, by my anxiety and loyalty, to deserve."

"This is putting the cart before the horse," he said with a good humour that was odd by contrast. "You have made your defence be-

fore Mrs. Merton has made her charge. No matter. Fortunately my having played the part of listener enables me to judge the question at issue fairly. My verdict, Miss Malcolmson, is—not guilty. You will please, therefore, unless, indeed, you are too much offended—remain in this house and continue your duties as Laura's friend, teacher, sister."

"She shall leave!" exclaimed Mrs. Merton.

"I think not," answered her husband.

"We shall see. If you hope to set her up over *me*, you mistake. You are a coward to treat me in this fashion. You are no man. I utterly despise and detest you. That impudent girl shall go—mark me! She shall not remain at Ashleigh Manor, if I burn the house down to turn her out of it."

And so saying she swept out of the room, followed by a laugh from Mr. Merton.

I looked at Laura, whose presence made this scene more shocking to me than I have words to express. Mrs. Merton's last words, however, did not serve to moderate the feeling of indignation which had given me the courage to defy her. The moment she left the room, I made up my mind to tell Mr. Merton that I had seen her and Captain Fowler together on the beach. He had pro-

tected me when I stood in need of support, and by doing so had made it compulsory on me to be loyal to him at any cost. Nor was I now restrained by motives of selfishness. Nothing that I could say could increase the provocation I had already given Mrs. Merton. I felt that my fate at Ashleigh Manor was sealed; for however violently Mr. Merton might oppose his wife, I had little doubt that she would have her way in the end. I resolved, at all events, that my last act should aim a blow at this hateful woman, whilst it should satisfy my sense of what was due to Mr. Merton.

No sooner had Mrs. Merton banged the door after her, than, looking at me, Mr. Merton said :—

"You have more courage than I should have given you credit for. There is quite an ireful sparkle in your eyes. Really your pitying capacity must be very great to force you into bearding the lioness in her very den. Jane Wakefield ought to be greatly obliged."

"I don't think so, sir. I'm afraid that I have done a great deal of mischief. I have exasperated Mrs. Merton against the unfortunate girl and lost me my own place."

"Oh, I dare say the lady's maid will suffer

through what you have have said. She will probably show you another livid mark on her arm to-morrow. But as to your having lost your place, that is not so. Did you not hear my verdict ?"

"I did, sir, and I am deeply obliged to you for your kindness. But I cannot forget that the lady who engaged me has the privilege to discharge me. Indeed I should be sadly wanting in pride——"

"Pride !" he interrupted. "Don't have anything to do with pride. Never be seen in the company of that shabby-genteel personage. He is a poor creature. His instructions and admonitions are misleading. He will keep you out of honest employment, though he will countenance your stooping to many shabby tricks. No, no. Have nothing to do with pride. I cut his acquaintance twelve years ago. He tried very hard to make me sell off house and grounds and hide myself in the backwoods of America, but I wouldn't listen to him. Humility is a better companion than Pride, though Humility is contemptible enough in his way. Is it a he or a she ? no matter. If you want a real friend, take the arm of Indifference, and let him lead you through life. He is the liveliest

of comrades, will make you laugh when others are weeping, will keep your conscience easy when others are groaning. Make him your friend at once, Miss Malcolmson; and then you will smile in the very shadow of Life's ugliest frown—as I do!"

"It would give me true pleasure to stop. All my wishes, all my interests detain me; but ——."

"Enough!" he said raising his hand. "We will not argue. I have given my orders. If I am not master here, I am nothing. Laura must have a companion, and if you go, where shall we find a successor? No! Mrs. Merton's government may extend to the kitchen, but not to the nursery. My child is my life. She is my special concern. If I saw her mother take as much interest in her as she does in one of her bonnets, I would be willing now and then to defer to her wishes. But let the matter rest. Laura, you will not let Miss Malcolmson leave you, will you?"

"No, papa."

"Do you love her?"

"Yes, very much."

"Why?"

"Because she is kind to me and tells me pretty stories and plays with me, and—and—because I love her."

"Do you love her better than you love mamma?"

"I don't love mamma."

"Why?"

"Because she isn't a good mamma. She never kisses me like you and Miss Malcolmson do. She does not like me to be with her, and she slaps me when she's angry, and she doesn't love you and Miss Malcolmson; and that's why."

"There," he exclaimed, turning to me, "Laura tells you that she loves you more than her mamma. Do you desire a better compliment?"

"No, sir; but it is a sad one."

"It is deserved. Take Laura upstairs now. It is time for her to go to bed."

It was, indeed, nearly ten o'clock. I rose and took Laura's hand, glanced at him hesitatingly, and said,

"I have something to say to you, sir."

"Is it Wakefield again?"

"No. It is a more painful subject than Wakefield."

"Speak then."

"It is a subject I should prefer to discuss with you alone."

"Upon my word you are very full of

mysteries, young lady," he exclaimed with a smile, though an uneasy look flitted across his face; "you put me in mind of what Hamlet says with your suggestions of 'Well, we know,' or 'We could, an if we would,' or 'If we list to speak,' or 'There be an if we might.' Perhaps you think with him the time is out of joint, and cry, 'O cursed spite, that ever I was born to set it right!' Well, I shall come to bid Laura good night as usual. Get you gone now, Laura. Your eyes are heavy. Would to God we were all children, that we might fall peacefully asleep when the night comes!"

CHAPTER XIV.

HOW MR. MERTON WAS AFFECTED BY MY DISCLOSURE.

AS I left Mr. Merton I could not help mentally capping his quotation from Shakespeare with another:

"He that is robbed; not wanting what is stolen,
Let him not know it, and he's not robbed at all."

I did not doubt for an instant that he was perfectly ignorant of the wrong his wife was doing him; and I asked myself if I should be acting kindly by telling him of the injury his honour had been done, which would be certain to make him utterly miserable whilst it would leave him powerless to repair it.

It was the casuistry of a timid mind, I admit; but if false in principle it was to be backed by a fair amount of sentiment.

It was too late now, however, to draw back;

though as I awaited his coming in the silence of the Red Room, with my indignation quelled and with all my fancy busy with the unexpected future that had suddenly disclosed itself, I would have given much to have evaded the delicate and painful task I had imposed on myself in the hurry of my feelings.

How should I open the subject? My mind was preoccupied by a multiplicity of considerations; its vigour was diffused among many thoughts; I could not concentrate attention. It was best, perhaps, that I could not; I might have rehearsed an elaborate preface which should gently slope the way to disclosure; but it was ten to one that the whole of my fine thoughts exhaled and evaporated under the practical experiment of expression. Fine thoughts *have* an alacrity at vanishing when the moment of action comes. How witty, how nimble, how pungent of idea you can be when you are alone! With what pitiless logic do you confute the opponent you are to meet to-morrow! What raking rejoinders, what vigilant repartees do you level at the head of the counsel who a few days' hence is to cross-examine you at Westminster! What an eloquent, what a touching peroration closes the speech you mean to make to-morrow when

you propose the health of the bride and bridegroom! In short, what talent we all of us possess in anticipation! But trust not the voice that whispers wit and eloquence in your ear in the watches of the night, or in the stillness of meditation. It is a mischievous imp that beguiles and fools you; for no sooner does the moment come when you want it, lo! its whisper is hushed, the sprite melts into thin air and leaves the brain to generate wit for itself.

I heard Mr. Merton's footsteps before long, and my heart began to beat painfully. No matter. I screwed my nerves up to the point of courage, and awaited his entrance with all the calmness at my command.

His quick knock sounded and the door opened.

"I have seen Laura," he said; "she is sound asleep. What deep innocence there is in her placid little face."

He seated himself, but with the air of a man who does not mean to stay long.

"I could pass whole hours watching her. She is lying with her hands clasped against her forehead in the attitude of prayer. I have seen many children sleep with their hands in that position. Is it one of the

vanishing memorials they preserve for a short while of the heaven they come from?"

"I have often noticed that Laura sleeps with her hands clasped, as you describe."

"Yes; but when we grow old we lose that attitude. We keep our hands down. We battle with Satan day and night. There is an expression of pain on every sleeper's face save that of a child. It is natural enough; for no sooner do we begin to think, than we begin to suffer. Do you think Laura like me?"

"I have observed a likeness when she sleeps, sir."

"Just so. The likeness struck me just now strongly. I can be paid no better compliment than to be told I am like her. People flatter each other by telling each other that they resemble flowers, birds, I know not what besides. The lover tells his mistress that she is like a lily or a rose. Nature is ransacked for images. But what flattery can be more exquisite than to be told you resemble a sleeping child? Such a likeness presupposes innocence, purity, calmness, fresh and lovely thoughts—for these things are a child's. You have something to say to me, Miss Malcolmson. What is it?"

"My indignation made me bold, sir, an hour ago. Now I have lost confidence; I fear to speak."

"You need have no fear."

"I know that, sir. But what I feel is that what I have to tell you ought to have been disclosed long ago. Having from want of courage missed the opportunity, it was my duty to remain silent."

"Come, you are reciting this preface to pique my curiosity. What is this mighty matter? Does it concern yourself?"

"No—it concerns you."

"Let me hear it, please, without more ado."

"It concerns Mrs. Merton."

"Well?"

"I have heard you sometimes speak of one Captain Fowler?"

He pricked up his ears, and looked at me with a sudden frown.

"When? Have I ever mentioned the fellow's name? I did not know."

"Some time ago—I hardly know how long ago, it was in the summer—I was alone on the beach, intending, after having rested myself, to walk to a favourite nook of mine in the cliff, a small cavern in which I was accus-

tomed to sit and look forth from it upon the sea. I was seated behind a block of fallen rock, around whose side I could see my hermitage without being seen thence. I was about to rise, when I beheld a man—well-dressed, with moustache and whiskers—more than that the distance would not allow me to see—standing at the mouth of the cave. After pausing awhile, he re-entered, and shortly after re-appeared, accompanied by a lady, whom I recognised after a little as Mrs. Merton."

"Well?"

I was amazed by his coldness. Was it possible that he could be acquainted with his wife's intimacy with Captain Fowler?

"I meant to have told you of what I had seen on my return, sir. I felt it was my duty not to keep this discovery hidden from you. But I had not, at that time, been long at Ashleigh Manor. The sense of independence, the feeling that I was earning my own bread, was sweet. I feared that my disclosure would enrage Mrs. Merton against me, and lead to my dismissal, and the thought of being dismissed into the world in which I was friendless—for the relatives I have left would not receive me home again—was intolerable.

therefore held my tongue. But after what has happened to-night, I felt that I should be doing you an injury by not telling you what I had seen. I have nothing to fear from Mrs. Merton, for to-morrow I leave her."

I was too nervous to take note of my logic, and he was too pre-occupied, or he might have asked me what had happened that night to make my silence more injurious to him than it had been all along.

"When was this?" he asked.

"I cannot recollect the date, sir. It was not very long after I had come here."

He fixed his eyes on the carpet. I heard him breathing deeply; but his downwards-bent face prevented me from witnessing the expression on it. There was an interval of silence that lasted some minutes. He looked up, and I saw that his face was quite bloodless. He resembled, indeed, a man just awakened from a long swoon. The pallor was made more significant of his emotion by the contrast of great strength which his form suggested.

He left his chair, and began to pace the room; seing a carafe and a tumbler on the sideboard, he poured out a glass of water, and drank it.

"This is a blow," he said, in a low tone, halting opposite me, and confronting me with his steady gaze. "It has unmanned me. I did not expect it. You should have told me before."

I hung my head. The gentleness of his rebuke made me feel its justice. Had he stormed, I should have repeated my apology, and expostulated.

"I knew her to be cold," he went on, with almost a touch of sadness in his voice; "and I knew her to be cruel, sinister, vicious, a bad mother, an unloving wife—but I did not suspect *this* . . . . Raise your eyes, Miss Malcolmson. You have nothing to fear. The worst is over when the truth is known. You would have been kinder had you been earlier in your disclosure. But it was no business of yours, after all. It is an ugly matter for a young girl to meddle with. I am grateful to you for having found the courage to be candid. Understand, I bear you no grudge for not having spoken before."

"I dared not, sir."

"I believe you. I can sympathise with your fears. It is true enough that had Mrs. Merton guessed you had seen her and her companion together, she would have turned

you away. Knowing what you did, I am amazed that you could speak to her—that you could sit in her company. She is a bad woman."

"Ever since I saw her with Captain Fowler, I have had an objection to meet her, not for my sake, but for Laura's. It shocked me to think of this pure and innocent little girl breathing the same air with one whose degradation was heaping a load of dishonour on her daughter's future. But you refused to let me keep Laura away from the drawing-room."

"I did not know your motive."

"I pray God I am not acting sinfully in speaking as I do. I feel the heavy responsibility of the confession I have made you. It is a terrible thing to set husband against wife, though there be guilt to sanction the hostility. It is a bitter duty to tell a father that his wife is too wicked for the society of his child. Even if self-interest had not kept me silent, the horror of the task would. The offer of the avowal was wrested from me by Mrs. Merton's insults. I deplore it now, sir; I deeply deplore it now."

"Why? You have no cause for regret. You have done what you consider your duty, and I appreciate and thank you for your

loyalty. I have said—I will say—nothing to cause you to be sorry. Indeed I am as calm as I was before you spoke."

He smiled.

"The twelve years of probation I have gone through," he continued, "should have prepared me for this—and worse. In marrying her I acted like a madman, and it is fit I should expiate my folly. They told me of her temper; they told me of her selfishness; they told me that she was cold, incapable of affection, that she would make me a bad wife. Her mother was eager for the marriage; she was just such another as her daughter, less venomous, but more crafty and ambitious. She coveted this estate and my fortune for her daughter; and she told lies to improve the impression which her child's beauty—for Mrs. Merton was beautiful in my sight in those days—had made on me. Though not young—I was twenty-eight—I was as unworldly as indulgence and pampering could make me. I had seen little of the world, was shy, and when I should have been roughening and hardening my character at college or in travel, I was rendering myself effeminate with study, and by pleasures taken in solitude. I was what you would call 'soft,' Miss

Malcolmson, dangerously susceptible of feminine charms and of feminine arts. Any good-looking woman might have married me in those days. Mr. Endicott, my wife's father, a kind-hearted old man—not a gentleman, though he had most of the qualifications which make a gentleman—advised me not to marry his daughter. He told me that he liked me, and wished to see me happier than his girl would make me. 'Don't believe what my wife says,' he would exclaim, 'my daughter don't care for you, but your money. She would fling you over to-morrow for a richer man.' But of what sort is the logic that convinces a man against his will? The most persuasive logic in the world—that of actions—failed to make me see what a terrible fool I was making of myself in believing that this woman loved me, and that she would make me a good wife. In spite of all her mother's precautions and her own vigilance, her character was perpetually breaking through the masquerade of affection in which she hastily equipped herself when my knock sounded on the door; and she would drive me half frantic with jealousy by coquetting with men in my presence. Still I married her against her father's and my mother's

entreaties, even in spite of my own doubts. After waiting twelve years, I am shown the consequence. It is a fit compensation. Folly must be paid for by somebody, and it is right that the person who makes a mistake should be the one to suffer for it. And yet I had imagined I had been made to suffer enough by her temper. *This* is too much."

His features contracted, as though a spasm had seized him. I said falteringly,

"Before you make up your mind to condemn her, sir, you should be sure of her guilt."

"Did you not see her with Captain Fowler?"

"They may have met by accident."

"You mean by design," he said, coming to the table, and leaning upon it. "Do not let us deceive ourselves. You have plenty of common-sense; but you have what is more precious than sense,—intuition. You know the truth, and so do I."

He paused, and continued in a deeper voice:

"This Captain Fowler is a rascal and a blackguard. I told him so to his face one day before my wife. He stammered, turned pale, and asked me what I meant. Had I been less angry I should have pitied his terror. I raised my hand, and he made haste to get out

of my way. He paused at the door to tell me that I should hear from him again; but he forgot his promise. Whenever I met him afterwards he hung his head, and sneaked past me like a whipped dog. Yet he is a big man. You saw him—at a distance, it is true, but you might guess his stature by contrasting him with Mrs. Merton, who is a tall woman. I will not offend your ears by acquainting you with the occasion of my expelling him. I had long marked him as a man unfit to be a visitor at my or any other gentleman's house. But Mrs. Merton, in spite of my implied wishes, insisted upon including him in the invitations she issued. His visits ended in the quarrel I have described. After that I took the initiative, and commanded Mrs. Merton never to speak to him again. She was frightened by my manner, and made me a promise, solemnly capping it with an oath. I believed she would keep her vow. She had, indeed, been as much, if not more to blame, than he; women generally are on such occasions. She gave him encouragement, and the unprincipled scoundrel trespassed into a behaviour which her reception of it licenced. But after I had spoken, I did not greatly fear anything more between them. I believed that he was too great

a coward to persist in an intimacy which, if I detected it, he knew would bring him under the handle of my dog-whip. Yet from time to time I would inquire if she ever saw him, and the warmth of her denials satisfied me. For the last three months I have never once set eyes on him, whence I concluded that he had left Ashleigh. Now you can understand why I ridicule your suggestion that they met by accident."

He set off pacing the room again with quick and energetic strides. I watched him, resolved to say as little as I could, for I felt that I had already said a great deal too much as it was. There was no demonstration of anger; he did not even appear moved; his face had lost the deadly whiteness which had first overspread it, but his lips were closed with the expression they wear when the teeth are set hard behind them. He looked as though lost in reflection, yet quite calm, despite the energy of his movements.

"Strange," he exclaimed, halting abruptly, "that I should be here alone with you at this hour of the night, talking to you of my trouble with as great freedom as if I had known you all your life. Have people ever told you that you have the gift of breaking down reserve in

those you converse with, and making them talk freely? I have found it so. I have chatted to you with more unreserve than I display to persons I have known twenty years. Is it your youth, Miss Malcolmson, that invites my confidence? Perhaps so. I have great faith in young people. If it were in my power I would surround myself with young friends or very old ones. Middle-age I distrust: to be sure it must be a caprice, for I cannot justify it. You are eighteen. When my troubles began you were six years old. Transport yourself in fancy to that age. What a long time ago it seems! How long to *me!* For twelve years the days have been so many renewals of my sorrow. For twelve years I have had no happiness, no love, no home. Why do you look surprised? 'No home!' you think. 'What does he call this noble house?' Ah! splendid rooms, glittering mirrors, sumptuous furniture do not make a home. You may rent a palace to live in, but if Love and Peace do not furnish it for you, it will be no home. Often when the evening sun has been turning the windows of this house into gold, colouring with a fairy-like loveliness of tints the grouped wings of this grand old pile, when summer has been busy with her beautifying

hand, draping the trees around with leaves and breathing the incense of violet, and rose and jessamine upon the air, I have looked upon this home of mine with horror, turned from it with loathing and despair. The very traditions and memories which should endear it have been corrupted by *her* presence. A shadow rests upon it which, turn wherever I will, comes between it and the sunlight, and fills the house with dungeon-gloom. Yet, O God! how have I striven with my misery! how have I stamped down my sufferings deep into my heart! I have not a friend who believes me to be the wretched man I am. When my heart has been breaking, when my blood has been boiling, through one of my wife's unrepeatable insults, I have smiled, I have seemed calm. Discipline has petrified this face," touching his cheek, "into stone. But when I have seemed most calm, then, could this mask of a countenance have been lifted, those who heard her words and wondered at my patience, would have looked upon a sight that would have supplied them with dreams for the remainder of their lives. But friends, acquaintances rather, people who come to your house to dance and eat, are but superficial observers for the most part. They took

me as they found me; and because I smiled and seemed unembarrassed under my wife's insults, they concluded that I was not unhappy,—or, perchance, that I had a conscience which prohibited me from resenting the insults which I doubtless deserved. I wanted them to think this. I am not one of those who love to hear their troubles made the gossip of their acquaintances. My endurance qualified my wife's fierce character in the sight of those who witnessed its exhibition by supplying it with reasons. 'He must deserve their abuse,' they think. 'Mark how humbly he endures her language. If her temper were unchallenged by acts unknown to us, be sure he would not be so submissive.' Has not this reflection crossed your mind? Has it not occurred to you that I may deserve much of the insults I receive from my wife?"

"No, sir."

"Are you sure? Perhaps you do not like to be plain."

"I have never thought you deserve her treatment. It would be impossible for me to think such a thing. But I have sometimes thought that you were not so unhappy as your language from time to time might lead me to suppose."

"Because I preserved my temper?"

"Yes, sir."

"There it is. You are deceived who live in this house, and must, therefore, know more of our secret lives than our neighbours. What must *they* think?"

Once more he set off pacing the room. I looked at the clock: it was drawing near eleven. The wind had risen, and in the silence that ensued, undisturbed by his foot-falls, I heard it moaning in the chimney, and singing thin dirges at the windows.

"What must happen?" he asked, looking at me with his full dark eyes filled with the strange inscrutable expression that had so often baffled me, so often made me reflective. "Shall I separate from her? That I would have done long ago but for Laura. Not that I should have suffered a moment's compunction in removing my child from such a mother—had my child been a boy I should not have hesitated. But a girl's character is frost-work, the breath of scandal must not come near it, or it will dissolve. I might have rescued myself from many a long year of misery, but I could not forfeit Laura's future for my present. *I* know the world well. I know the shrugs and sneers with

which Prudery follows the girl about, to whose parents there is attached what society calls a 'history.' No! Laura's father and mother must not be talked about. This is the one horror all my patience has been exerted to avert. Advise me. Your instincts are unspoiled by knowledge of the world. You might make a suggestion which would prove more practical and practicable than anything I could imagine."

"Oh, sir," I exclaimed, "do not ask me. I could not advise—"

"Put yourself in my place and tell me how you would act."

"I cannot, sir," I answered, terrified by the heavy sense of responsibility his words, for the moment, inspired.

He looked at me; a smile flickered on his lips and vanished.

"How much is man alone in this world! You doubtless thought me cynical when I reasoned thus the other day. But see how lonely I am in my sorrow. Who would advise me now with the sympathy that should make me feel my trouble was shared? Let me call upon my friends for counsel—they would stammer, shrink, sneak away. We are born to help ourselves," he exclaimed,

pressing his hand to his breast. "I will confer with Laura to-morrow. Her eyes will give me ideas."

All of a sudden he extended his hand.

"Good night, Miss Malcolmson. You will not thank me for keeping you up so late."

I took his hand, and as I did so, said impulsively:

"I am afraid I have erred in speaking to you. I have caused you deep pain."

"You have done wisely. It was a blow, but you are not responsible for it. Yours was not the hand that dealt it."

"I am leaving to-morrow, sir; perhaps I may not see you before I go. I wish to thank you whilst I can for the great kindness you have shown me. I deeply deplore that my last words, which ought to have been those of gratitude, should have given you pain—pain," I exclaimed, warmly, "I would give much, very much, sir, were it in my power to soothe."

"Have you made up your mind to leave?"

"It is Mrs. Merton's command that I should. I have no right to remain after I have been dismissed.

"Then you refuse to recognise my autho-

rity? You vest the whole government of this house in Mrs. Merton?"

"How could I stop after what has occurred?"

"I will not argue now—it is too late. There is money due to you, is there not?"

"I believe so."

"Make your calculations, and let me know the sum. I will come to this room to-morrow morning after breakfast. You will not think of going until I see you?"

"No, sir."

"Understand, that is my express order."

I bowed.

"Now good night. Kiss my child for me; I will not go to her, lest I should disturb her. Hark! how the wind moans!"

He looked through the window.

"The ground looks like marble; but the sky is black in the west and vaporous overhead. I am afraid we shall have a storm before the morning. Good night."

And letting fall the curtain he walked out of the room.

Though past my usual hour of retiring to rest, I did not feel in the least degree sleepy. The wind plained sullenly at the window, and the sound attracted me to look forth as Mr.

Merton had done. I saw the land, as he had described it, lying like marble under the eye of the brilliant moon; but ever and again great masses of vapour, detached from the swart and gathering phalanxes in the west, and growing white as they neared the moon, swept over it, turning the earth black in their transit, and burying the dim stars that burned palely out of the gloomy element. Upon the sward, in the intervals of the moonshine, the shadows of the trees lay thin and sharply defined. Afar, mingling in the moaning of the wind, I could hear the deep voice of the sea fretted by the rising wind. As I watched, methought I saw the lurid radiance of lightning dart swiftly across the breast of the deep gloom out of which the wild clouds came flying. The storm is coming, I thought, and yonder bright moon which rides now so high and peacefully, stooping gracefully to the soft clouds, and making them luminous with her kisses, will soon be overwhelmed, her light quenched by the streaming lightning, her peace mocked by the booming thunder. And thus had it been with me. Up to a few hours ago I was resting calmly and tranquilly in the security of my position at Ashleigh Manor, but on a

sudden the storm had overspread and raged around me, and my place to-morrow would know me no more.

It was natural that my reflections should make me deeply despondent. I had no conception how I should act, where I should go, what I should do, when I left Ashleigh Manor. To return to my aunt was out of the question. Indeed, there was almost no trouble I would not rather have encountered than meet her again with a request for aid. The only course I could adopt, so far as I could judge, was to take a lodging at Ashleigh, and make inquiries in the neighbourhood for another situation. I had little doubt that Mr. Merton would help me in a search if I asked him; and with such support as his powerful influence would supply, I need not long despair of finding a new home.

And yet, viewing it from the cheeriest standpoint, my look-out was still a very gloomy one. Other considerations, beside those of my future, contributed to deepen my despondency. I hated the idea of a separation from Laura. I had long since learnt to love the child for her sweetness, for the thousand prettinesses of her character, for her affectionate nature, for the little trouble she

gave me, and largely, because of her mother's indifference towards her. I knew that she loved me; and I felt it very hard to separate from this one friend that I had made.

The thought of leaving Mr. Merton pained me, too. I was attracted to him by those very singularities of character by which another might have been repelled. The miserable time he had of it with his wife supplied him with another point of interest in my eyes. His troubles appealed to me; I sympathised with them, and found a pathos that was dangerous because of its power to move and fascinate me, in the brave and tranquil fortitude with which he endured the heavy pressure of his married life. Indeed, as I pondered the thoughts that laboured in my mind, I started to detect in my reluctance to leave Mr. Merton an element of tenderness of whose existence I had hitherto had no suspicion. I drove back the emotion with a mingled sense of shame and wonder. I left the window, and, as he had done, paced the room while I mused.

Had I in the tumult of my feelings found the leisure to analyse this novel emotion, I should have done so. But my fancies thronged, displacing one another as they pressed for-

ward, and giving me no opportunity for dispassionate, deliberate reflection. My memory recurred to the language he had held to me in speaking of his wife, of the grave intensity of the expression on his face, the illustration of a severely-disciplined nature within whose stony cell mad passions might rave and shrill and menace, yet utter no sound loud enough to pierce to the ear of those who stood and watched without.

The unemotional exterior concealing a nature quick and violent with feeling—how admirable is the conjunction! how admirable and how difficult! Aptly conceiving what this man had suffered, and judging of his real character by illustrations of love for his child, of kindness and consideration for me and others, there appeared to me something heroical in that achievement of calm and unconcern with which he had masked his face and deceived the world. His rugged countenance, his vigorous frame, the possession of great physical strength, seemed unmistakable implications of a nature corresponding in rudeness, passion, and power. How had he mastered that nature! His eyes were good indicators of a lively and even a violent temper; yet never, since I had known him, how-

ever provoked, sneered at, insulted, had I seen that temper expressed. The intellectual hand he had laid upon his nature must be of god-like proportions. With that nobly-shaped head, and with that wonderful capacity of self-discipline, what difficulties had life to offer that he should find insurmountable? where was the steep he could not climb?

In reflecting upon the quarrel that had led to my dismissal, I naturally thought of the occasion of it—the unfortunate girl, Jane Wakefield. After Mrs. Merton had flung from the drawing-room she had probably gone to her bedroom, where she would ring for her maid. To what violent words had the girl been made to listen! what wild fury had she not had to encounter! I hardly liked to think of the storm which, I might be certain, had been raging in Mrs. Merton's bedroom while her husband and I coldly discussed her wickedness. I had little doubt that Mrs. Merton would discharge the girl; and I feared the reproach of the young creature's mild eyes when, as it was highly probable, she would come to the Red Room in the morning and ask me why I had broken the promise I made her not to speak of her to her mistress. There was more romance than

practicability in the resolution I formed that if Jane Wakefield were discharged, I would share my slender purse with her and receive her at the lodgings I might hire, and whilst seeking a situation for myself lose no opportunity to procure one for her. I was pretty sure she would thank me for my interference when once she was fairly out of the house, and when the labour of inquiring for another place should diminish the terror with which she appeared to contemplate her dismissal from Ashleigh Manor. It was, at least, certain that she could not continue much longer in her attendance on Mrs. Merton. She might endure her mistress's insults, and fury, and pinches, and perchance her blows for a little while yet; but the vital force that was every day ebbing in her constitution would get so low at last that she would be rendered unfit for work; her health would give way, and she would be discharged because of her uselessness. The weak, timid creature seemed to forget that the very uselessness which would procure her discharge from Ashleigh Manor would extinguish her chance of getting another situation elsewhere.

The one speculation that was incessantly recurring among my other thoughts was what

Mr. Merton meant to do now that he had been informed of his wife's deceit and—shall I say?—infamy. It was not to be supposed that he would continue to live with her. From what he had said of Laura and her future, I might be sure that he would not court the publicity of a divorce, even if a divorce were obtainable on such evidence as it lay in his power to produce. Whether he would surrender Ashleigh Manor to her and quit for ever with his child the scene of his degradation and his misery; or whether he would force his wife to take up her abode elsewhere; it was impossible to guess. The former appeared to me the course he would most probably adopt; for the mother's absence from Ashleigh Manor would, unless the truth were told, find discreditable and dishonourable interpretations which Mr. Merton would be made to feel poignantly indeed, as Laura grew older. On the other hand, if he withdrew with his child, the tongue of scandal, though long enough, heaven knows! might fail to reach him in his distant retirement.

On such a subject, however, I felt the idleness of speculation. Still sleepless I went to my bedroom. Wistfully did I look at my dear little pupil as I stood by her bedside.

I believed—I felt that it was the last night I should ever sleep near her again; and I cannot describe the feeling of wretchedness and hopelessness that overcame me as I softly pressed my lips to her white forehead.

Before I fell asleep, the storm that had been menacing us for several hours burst with violent fury right over the house. The lightning was dazzling and so incessant that it seemed to me as if the heavens must be overspread with one broad sheet of flame. The thunder roared continuously; or if there were intervals in the wild booming of the cloud artillery, the gale filled the pauses with quick crashes which threatened to burst asunder the solid windows. There is something singularly terrible in a thunderstorm raging in the dead of night. That ominousness which attends it in the daytime caused by a darkness overspreading the earth when the sun is abroad, and by the horrid stillness, amid which the clouds gather together their livid and deadly fronts—as if Nature held her breath in expectation of the shock of sound that will make her tremble to the heart—is made overpowering by the blackness of the night, the wilder intensity of the headlong lightning-flame, and the deep sense of help-

lessness which profound and universal gloom must always inspire. I listened with tightly-closed eyes to the thunder crashing along the sky, to the wild screams and sullen echoings of the gale as it smote with its full fury against the windows of my bedroom, lashing the panes with great hail-stones and floods of water, with all meditation suspended by the terror the storm excited. Glad was I that Laura did not awaken and call me, for I should not dared have left my bed to have walked across the room in and around which the lightning-reflections were dizzily leaping as if the walls were on fire. It was long after the storm had ceased—the thunder stilled—and the full moon had regained her empire, and silvered with its peaceful flood the blinds of the windows, ruling the carpet with beams of ice, before I fell asleep. But my slumbers were as perturbed and broken as if the thunder still roared; and I woke up terrified with the idea that I was lying in a chamber on fire with blue flame.

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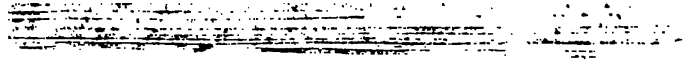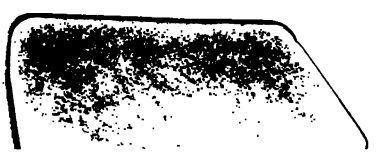
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